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Printed March 5, 2015 from <http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/managing-emotions/grief-and-loss/coping-grief>

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## Coping with Grief [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 06/2013

### Key Messages:

- Grief may come and go and vary in intensity over months or years.
- While it may feel like the pain of loss will never end, most people find that the intensity lessens over time.
- There are strategies to help cope with grief, and each person needs varying levels of support.

Grieving the death of a person close to you often involves intensely painful feelings. Waves of grief may come and go with varying intensity over months or years, and it may feel like the pain will never end. However, most people find that, over the course of a year or more, the intensity of grief lessens. As hard as it may seem, people find ways to adjust to life without the person they loved and lost. Although working through grief can be a long and difficult process, there are things you can do to help yourself heal.

### Strategies for coping with loss

Just as each person's experience of grief is unique, coping strategies work differently for each person. It may help to think about how you've coped with difficult situations in the past and apply similar strategies. Here are some tips for coping with a loss:

**Allow yourself to experience the pain of loss.** As much as it hurts, it is natural and normal to grieve. Sometimes people feel guilty about the way they feel, thinking they should "get over it." Give yourself permission to grieve, and allow yourself to fully experience the feelings of grief, such as shock, sadness, anger, and loneliness. Don't judge yourself for having feelings that seem inappropriate. And let yourself react in ways that help process and release the intense emotions you feel, even if it means crying or screaming. Some people find it helpful to set aside a private time every day to think about their loved one and experience the feelings that arise. This approach is especially helpful for those who have difficulty showing their feelings to others.

**Talk with others.** Talking about your loss and sadness with others may help you process and release your feelings. Let family and friends know how important it is for you to share your feelings with them. And reassure them that you don't expect them to have answers; you just need them to listen.

**Find creative outlets.** Consider expressing your feelings through creative activities you enjoy, such as music or art. Or write your thoughts, feelings, and memories in a journal. Looking back through your journal will allow you to see how your grief changes over time. Learn more about [finding comfort through journaling](#) [3].

**Engage in physical activity.** Find a physical activity—such as walking, running, or riding a bicycle—to help you cope with your feelings. Vigorous exercise and activities like hitting a punching bag or hitting golf balls at a driving range may help release frustration or anger.

**Give yourself a break from grieving.** It is important to take breaks from grieving with pleasant activities and interactions with supportive family members and friends. For example, you may choose to go to dinner with friends, take a relaxing bath, watch a movie, start a new hobby, or enjoy the outdoors. Remember that it is good for you to enjoy yourself and that it is okay to laugh and feel happy, despite your loss.

**Maintain a routine.** Maintaining a basic routine of daily activities helps you structure your time and keeps you connected to familiar people and places. If possible, avoid making major decisions, such as changing jobs or moving within the first year of bereavement. This will help maintain a sense of normalcy and security and lessen additional stress.

**Forgive yourself.** Forgive yourself for the things you regret doing or saying to your loved one, as well as the things you regret not doing or saying. Letting go of regrets and the pain that comes with them will allow you to focus on the good memories.

**Be patient.** Allow your grief to unfold at a pace that is natural for you. Don't judge or criticize yourself for not coping as well or healing as quickly as you think you should. Each person needs to grieve in ways that feel right.

**Take care of yourself.** It is important to attend to your physical needs during a period of bereavement because grieving is both emotionally and physically exhausting. Care for yourself by trying to get enough sleep at night, eating a healthy diet, and exercising.

**Join a support group.** [Support groups](#) [4] offer you the chance to talk with others who have similar experiences. Group members can offer encouragement, comfort, guidance, and practical suggestions, reassuring you that your experiences are normal. You may want to join a general bereavement support group or a group that is specific to your situation, such as a group for bereaved spouses or for those who have lost a loved one to cancer.

### **Seeking additional support**

Many people find other ways to help cope with their grief, including counseling and therapy.

## Grief counseling

Most of the support that people receive after a loss comes from family and friends. Sometimes, a person's grief may be so severe that it interferes with their ability to perform daily responsibilities. If you feel that you need more help coping with your grief, you may want to talk with a counselor. A counselor can help people work through the grief process in a one-on-one or group setting.

## Grief therapy

Grief therapy is for people who have extreme or complicated grief reactions, known as complicated grief. A person with complicated grief is often unable to work through their grief without help.

The following are four common types of complicated grief:

**Exaggerated grief.** Grief reactions are extreme and overwhelming, potentially worsening over time.

**Chronic grief.** Feelings of intense grief continue indefinitely and do not improve over time.

**Masked grief.** Grief reactions are absent or indirect, taking the form of an illness or abnormal behavior.

**Delayed grief.** Grief reactions are triggered months or years later by another loss or distressing event, rather than at the time of the initial loss.

The goals of grief therapy are to help a person understand why he or she is having a difficult time coping with the loss and to identify barriers that are preventing the person from resolving the grief. A mental health professional, such as a psychologist or clinical social worker, provides grief therapy in an individual or group setting.

Because each person grieves differently, decisions about the need for grief therapy are made on a case-by-case basis. However, some signs that you may need additional help coping with your grief include ongoing difficulty eating or sleeping well, inability to work or complete regular daily activities six months after your loss, inability to care for yourself, feelings of worthlessness, or thoughts of suicide.

## Finding help

To find help dealing with grief, start by talking with your primary health care provider, who can help you determine the type of support that will work best and can often provide a referral. You can also check with a local hospital or cancer treatment center, a community hospice service, your health insurance company, or your employer's employee assistance program.

Learn more about [types of counseling and how to find a counselor](#) [5].

## **More Information**

[Grief and Bereavement \[6\]](#)

[Understanding Grief and Loss \[7\]](#)

[Coping With Change After a Loss \[8\]](#)

## **Additional Resources**

[National Cancer Institute: Grief, Bereavement, and Coping With Loss \[9\]](#)

[LIVESTRONG: Grief and Loss \[10\]](#)

[CancerCare: Grief and Loss \[11\]](#)

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### **Links:**

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/managing-emotions/grief-and-loss/coping-grief>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24528>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25383>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24699>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25111>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25293>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25291>

[9] <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/supportivecare/bereavement/patient/allpages>

[10] <http://livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Emotional-Effects-of-Cancer/Grief-and-Loss>

[11] [http://www.cancercare.org/publications/tagged/grief\\_and\\_loss?topic=bereavement](http://www.cancercare.org/publications/tagged/grief_and_loss?topic=bereavement)