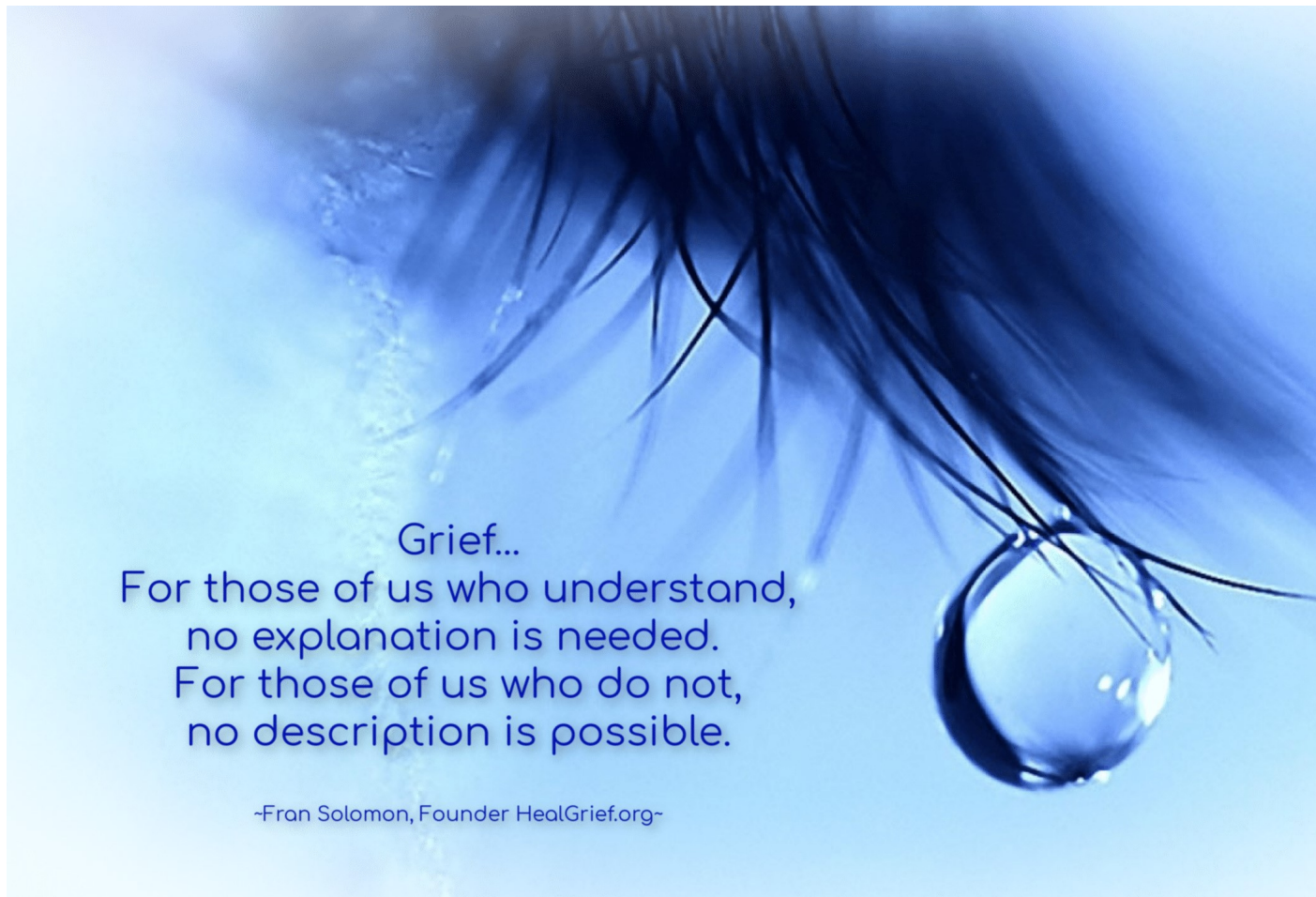


Understanding Grief and Loss: An Overview



Grief..
For those of us who understand,
no explanation is needed.
For those of us who do not,
no description is possible.

-Fran Solomon, Founder HealGrief.org-

Grief is personal and individual, and every person experiences its nuances differently. Your personality, your support system, your natural coping mechanisms and many other things will determine how loss will affect you. There are no rules, no timetables, and no linear progression. Some people feel better after a few weeks or months, and for others it may take years. And in the midst of recovery there may be setbacks — this nonlinear process can't be controlled. It's critical that you treat yourself with patience and compassion and allow the process to unfold.

Below you'll find some insights into the stages and symptoms of grief. We've also collected some advice from professionals about how to best get through the grieving process. We hope that the following information will help you reach a place in your process where, in spite of your grief, you are better able to function and live on a daily basis.

Grief is often described in stages, though each stage may last for a different period of time — for some people, the stages may be briefer or longer than for others, and some people may not experience all of them. But acknowledging that you may experience some or all of these stages will help you understand what may be happening. And you should not pass judgment on yourself or allow others to — you have the right to grieve and to fully experience your grief. Your feelings are normal, and it's important to remember that at some point, it will get better. You may not get over your loss, but you will survive it. The five general stages of grief, as described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross:

Denial: This can't be happening.

Anger: Why did this happen? Who is to blame?

Bargaining: Make this not happen and I will...

Depression: I can't bear this; I'm too sad to do anything.

Acceptance: I acknowledge that this has happened, and I cannot change it.

While the [five stages of grief](#) may appear to be steps in a process, **they are not**. Even Kübler-Ross said that the stages are not meant to neatly package up grief — there is no typical loss and no typical grief. Grieving is as individual as we are and is not a linear process.

Grief indicators, the common signs and symptoms of grief

Shock and disbelief: It's hard to accept a death. You may feel numb and question whether the loss really happened — this isn't unusual. Some have noted their initial reluctance to even notify others of a loss in case it turned out to be untrue. This is a normal reaction, as is still expecting someone to call or write or show up, even if intellectually you have accepted their death.

Sadness: Profound sadness is a universal experience, and can often lead to a feeling of aloneness or isolation. We sometimes believe that no one can understand the depth of our grief, which drives us deeper into sorrow.

Guilt: You may feel guilt over things you said or did — or those you didn't and felt you should have. In cases of suicide, many people question whether they could have changed the outcome somehow. Yet there is nothing that can stand in the way of death or a final decision made by someone else, and over time we have to acknowledge and accept that. Still, it's difficult to do in the early days or months of grieving.

Anger: Regardless of how someone we loved died, anger often comes into play. You may be angry with the person for not being here anymore, or with caregivers for not doing more. You may blame God or others. Or you may not be able to direct your anger against a specific source, but find that everyday, small injustices seem much bigger than they might have in the past. This is normal, and no one should tell you that you have to stop or let go of your anger — that will happen eventually as part of your process, on your own timeline.

Fear: A loss can trigger fear on many levels — fear of your own mortality, of losing those you love, of facing life without the person who has died. It can include fear of the future and the uncertainty you may now feel about your life's plans, knowing that someone close to you has died.

Physical pain: We often think of grief as emotional, but it can manifest physically as well. Symptoms can include nausea, fatigue, lowered immunity, weight loss or gain, insomnia, aches and pains and more. Although it can be quite difficult, it's important to do what you can to maintain your health during grief.

Ongoing triggers for grief

During bereavement and after, many things can trigger a return to intense grief — expected things like a birthday, a holiday or the anniversary of the death. Or more subtle experiences like catching a scent of perfume or cologne that reminds you of your loved one, or the smell of their favorite food cooking. These are “grief triggers” and they can be long-term challenges.

A common trigger may also be “secondhand” grief. Someone you hardly knew dies, yet their death may trigger your grief again. All of this is normal, expected, and something you should allow yourself to feel; do not judge yourself for reacting or not reacting to any of these triggers. Developmental issues can also trigger grief, especially for children — when a girl has to start high school without her mom; when a boy turns 16 and doesn’t have his dad to teach him how to drive. Even smaller events, like a young girl missing her big sister’s support as she’s about to become a Girl Scout, can trigger a feeling of loss.

It’s important to know that grief triggers exist and may affect you. They are normal, but if you’re aware of them you may be able to take steps to keep them to a minimum. Perhaps if you’re planning to share a holiday or other important event with relatives, talk to them ahead of time about expectations. Suggest and agree on strategies that will honor the person you loved while allowing you to compassionately support each other.

If you take nothing else from this section, please remember this: treat yourself with kindness, compassion and without judgment. You have the right to grieve, and no one — including yourself — can tell you when it’s time to end that process.

Myths and facts about grief

MYTH: The pain will go away faster if you ignore it.

Fact: Trying to ignore your pain or keep it from surfacing will only make it worse in the long run. For real healing, it is necessary to face your grief and actively deal with it.

MYTH: It’s important to be “be strong” in the face of loss.

Fact: Feeling sad, frightened or lonely is a normal reaction to loss. Crying doesn’t mean you are weak. You don’t need to “protect” your family or friends by putting on a brave front. Showing your true feelings can help them and you.

MYTH: If you don’t cry, it means you aren’t sorry about the loss.

Fact: Crying is a normal response to sadness, but it’s not the only one. Those who don’t cry may feel the pain just as deeply as others. They may simply have other ways of showing it.

MYTH: Grief should last about a year.

Fact: There is no right or wrong timeframe for grieving. How long it takes can differ from person to person. At HealGrief, we believe that grief doesn’t go away — we just learn how to manage it differently day by day.

Finding grief support

One of the critical factors in healing from grief is the support of other people. Having support from your family, friends, or a community of others who have also experienced grief allows you to feel that someone else “gets it.” Being able to share your story or your feelings is vital to the healing process.

Places you may find grief support:

Faith-based groups: If you are religious, you may find support in your community or with the leader of your church or temple. They may be able to provide suggestions for rituals or prayer that can help. Because of their role in the community, they may have extensive experience with loss.

Support groups: There are many types of support groups for both general and specific types of loss. If this feels intimidating, remember that you can attend a group and just listen. You won't be forced to speak until you're comfortable, and you may draw comfort from being in a community of others who have some understanding of the depth of your grief. You can find [local support groups](#) on HealGrief.org.

Therapists or counselors: Sometimes, talking to a professional with experience in grief counseling can help you work through some of the intense emotions you may be feeling. It's normal to feel vulnerable during grief, and you might not always want to share your thoughts with the people in your daily life. A compassionate third party who has grief experience may help you overcome obstacles to your healing. You can find more resources [here](#).

Community: You may be a private person or not have a local network of support. Here at [HealGrief](#), you can post your thoughts and feelings in our community healing section, or read the postings of others who have suffered a similar loss. Through this community, you may feel less isolated.

Ways to take care of yourself

When you're grieving, it is both important and difficult to take care of yourself. Your loss may take away your energy, your appetite and your emotional reserves.

Allow yourself to grieve: Often we push the grief away, or tamp it down by distracting ourselves with activities or tasks. Trying to avoid grief only leads to prolonging it — the grief has to be allowed to surface. Unresolved grief can lead to depression, anxiety, substance abuse and health problems.

Express your feelings in a tangible way: This can be done in many ways, depending on your creativity or usual means of expression. You can write about your loss in a journal, or send a private note to the person you've lost. You can make a scrapbook, photo album or create an [online memorial](#) celebrating that person's life. You can also get involved in an organization or philanthropy that was meaningful to them, or make a donation in their name.

Be physically healthy: Your mind and body are connected, and physical health helps with the emotional healing process. It's natural to feel lethargic or low energy, but if you're able to take a walk or a run, it will promote the process. Combat your fatigue with an appropriate amount of sleep, and choose foods that provide you not just with comfort but energy.

Don't judge yourself, or let others judge you: You are allowed to grieve for as long and as deeply as you need to. No one — including yourself — can tell you when to “move on” or “get over it.” It's okay to be angry, to cry, not cry, or even laugh — you need to allow for moments of joy in your grief, and feel no guilt for having a moment without pain. We recommend that you read the [Mourner's Bill of Rights](#), to reassure yourself of your “right” to grieve.

When grief doesn't go away

It's normal to feel numb, angry, sad or even depressed following a loss. But as time passes those emotions should lessen in their severity. If you aren't feeling any better over time or are experiencing any of the following, you may be suffering from a condition called "[complicated grief](#)" or you may be experiencing actual depression. If left untreated, both complicated grief and depression can lead to significant health problems, emotional damage and more.

Highly recommended websites to look up:

www.youngminds.co.uk

www.childrensociety.org.uk