

# HORIZON

*Living with loss*

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## Grief Essentials

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### Unique Experiences of Grief

**G**rief is a unique experience. Some people describe grief as “a hole in my heart” or like being in a black hole or tunnel. Others say it feels like being on the ocean with waves washing over them or riding a roller coaster of emotions. Yet others experience actual pain, often in their heart. Each person grieves each death differently, depending primarily on the quality and unique aspects of the relationship with the loved one, but also related to the circumstances of the death and funeral; cultural, religious, and spiritual beliefs; general coping style; other current life stressors; prior experiences with loss; gender and personality; physical and mental health; supports available.

Grief is a normal process, a reaction to loss. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Grief is not “cured;” it is not something that we “get over;” we learn to cope and add it into our life experiences. There is no timetable for grieving, so one is not “finished grieving” or “still grieving.” Grieving takes as long as it takes; it is never “done,” as remembering a favorite sight, sound, smell, place, time together can bring back memories and tears years after the death. Holidays, and “special” days can trigger and aggravate grief reactions as the loved one’s absence can be magnified. Most people grieve in expected ways and eventually find themselves once again enjoying life. The extent to which grief interferes with daily functioning determines the need for professional help and/or medication.

### Universal Experiences of Grief

**W**hile each person’s grief journey is unique, there are universal experiences also. Grief effects individuals physically. Some have set aside their own well-being to be caregiver to a loved one or may ignore physical symptoms. Some experience symbolic pain where their loved

one felt pain. *TIP: pain is a sign that something could be wrong and should be discussed with your physician.*

Grief effects individuals emotionally. Initial numbness, shock, and disbelief protect the bereaved from experiencing the full measure of their sadness. Other emotions may arise such as anxiety, anger, blame, guilt, regret, jealousy and even relief. *TIP: honor your emotions – feelings are neither right nor wrong. If your feelings lead to depression or thoughts of suicide, seek help from your doctor immediately.*



Grief effects individuals socially. Some may isolate themselves since they fear their mood may bring others “down.” Some may try to ignore their grief by socializing. Friends and family may not “be there” for you as you expect. *TIP: Realize that some of your friendships may change and that others who knew your loved one are also grieving. Find a “grief buddy” who can just listen and support you.*

Grief effects individuals cognitively. Some feel a lack of confidence or insecurity about life or are unsure of what to do now. Some may experience confusion or difficulty staying focused to complete tasks. It may seem that you are living in a fog or that life is going on around you, but you are not in it. *TIP: This is temporary and as your mind makes sense of what you have experienced, this will pass. You have not lost knowledge or skill, you have lost a relationship.*

Grief effects individuals spiritually. Trying to understand why this has happened and how to go on; pondering the meaning of a person’s life or a purpose for life without the loved one; feeling the deceased’s presence or a sign of presence all are spiritual experiences. A faith tradition may be of comfort or challenge when confronted with the death of a loved one. *TIP: Create space in your life to mourn and a way to honor the life of the deceased.*

## A Look at Distinctly Different Grieving Styles

We have learned that there are two different patterns of grieving that fall at opposite ends of the spectrum of grieving styles: *intuitive* and *instrumental*. A person is not strictly an intuitive or an instrumental griever, but a blend of the two, leaning more toward one way or the other.

Those who lean toward the *intuitive* style of grieving usually experience and express emotions, cry, talk about the deceased person and the loss with family and friends. The intuitive griever will be more likely to join a bereavement support group, because an intuitive griever will often gain comfort by sharing feelings with others or listening to others' feelings.

Individuals who lean toward an *instrumental* way of grieving tend to focus on thoughts about the deceased and problem solving more than feelings. They often channel grief into activity. They might appear not to be grieving due to a lack of outward expression of emotions. They are also more likely to grieve by themselves

as opposed to grieving with family and friends or joining a bereavement support group.

An important piece for instrumental grievers is that the activities they pursue be connected in some way to the person that died. Some examples of instrumental ways of grieving are: planting a tree or garden, creating art or a physical memorial to honor and remember the loved one, creating rituals, getting involved with an organization or issue related to the loss. In these examples the activity is not an avoidance of grief but a way to work through the grief. A tear may not be shed in front of another, but still grief exists within.

The benefits of outwardly expressing emotions and connecting with others around a loss are evident. But we must remember that this is not the only way to grieve.

*Resources:*

- "Swallowed by a Snake," by Thomas Golden
- "Men Don't Cry . . . Women Do," by Terry L. Martin and Kenneth J. Doka
- "Living With Loss Series," by San Diego Hospice and Palliative Care.

### Intuitive Grievers

- Focus on feelings more than on thoughts or problem-solving
- Express feelings through tears
- Resolve feelings by sharing them with others or by listening to someone else's feelings

### Instrumental Grievers

- Focus on thoughts and problem solving more than feelings
- Might appear not to be grieving due to lack of outward expression of emotions
- Tend to be more independent and channel energy into activity

## Grief Work

Grief work may be some of the hardest work you will do in your life. But there are certain tasks that can make the work easier. Dr. Alan Wolfelt identifies these tasks in his book Understanding Your Grief. First, accept the reality of the death – not just in your head, but in your heart. Second, let yourself feel the pain of that loss, as difficult as that may be – not just the loss of your loved one's physical presence, but the loss of what the relationship meant in your life. Third, remember the person who died – the whole person, good and bad, not an idealized version of him or her. Fourth, develop a new self-identity that enables you to go on in life feeling complete, not alone. Fifth, find meaning in this experience – meaning of the loved one's life, and your life with and without him or her. Finally, let others help you – now and always.

That help can begin now. Start by taking care of yourself - practice good nutrition even if you are not hungry, get adequate sleep and exercise. Identify at least one person who will just listen to you as you express your grief. Maintain relationships with family and friends. Determine what you are able and not able to accomplish and don't expect to function like "normal." You will eventually come to a "new normal." Live one day at a time for as long as it takes. Believe that you will come to terms with this death and once again find joy in life. Speak with a bereavement counselor, participate in a workshop or group support event with Hospice of the Piedmont.

*Most anyone grieving the death of a loved one can benefit from bereavement services at Hospice of the Piedmont. But if your grief reactions significantly and, over time, negatively effect your daily living (eating, sleeping, managing daily affairs), contact a doctor, pastor/spiritual counselor, therapist or Hospice for support and guidance.*

# Bereavement Support for Children, Teens and their Families Through the *Journeys* Program

*After experiencing the death of someone important to us, we all experience grief. Although it can be different for all of us, grieving can be particularly hard on children and teens. The loneliness along with peer pressures at school, and expectations of school work, sports, and family life, can be overwhelming. As if that were not enough, they are in the stage of life where "talking about feelings" may not easily happen. At our Journeys events, children and teens ages 5-18, and their families, will be with others who face the same challenges, which can be a tremendous comfort to them.*

## A Few Things That Grieving Children, Teens, and Adults Have Taught Us ...

- Grieving people of all ages want to talk about the one they loved. ("I lost my brother; who did you lose?")
- Children, and teens especially, feel less alone when they can be with others who also have experienced the death of someone they love.
- The reality of the death hits especially hard after the dinners have stopped coming to the house, and the phone calls and cards have diminished.
- Grieving people want to tell the story of their loved one's life, and death. Sometimes they need an invitation to do so. The "fear of tears" in the re-telling of the story



can make adults and children want to keep it in. Allowing the tears, anger, regret, guilt . . . is the only way through, and so helpful to the griever.

- Not all grieving people cry. Most want to, and feel better after they do.
- Listening is the best gift you can give a grieving child, teen, or adult.
- Everyone's journey through grief is different. There is no timetable, or one path.
- Experiencing the death of someone that you love is

not something you "get over." It is something you learn to live with, after you figure out who you are in this world without them.

- Sometimes the death of someone you love means more losses to come: moving, loss of income, change in schools, leaving friends and neighbors, or even family.
- A strong support system is paramount in moving through the journey of grief.
- A memorial to the loved one who has died can be helpful.
- Many times classmates of the child who has had someone die will want to do something for their friend. A memorial ceremony as simple as a balloon launch or candle-lighting can be helpful.



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**HORIZON**  
*Living with loss*

*A publication dedicated  
to grief education, support,  
and the offer of hope.*

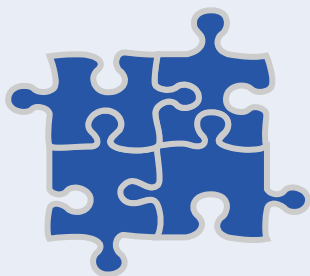
**Myth**

The longer and closer the relationship with the deceased, the harder it is to cope with the loss.



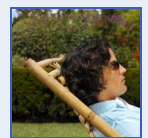
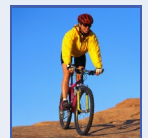
**Reality**

No matter how long or close the relationship with the deceased, each loss has its own challenges and each grief experience is filled with complexities and opportunities for growth.



***Self-Care Tip***

Take note of the ways in which you are moving forward in your grief process, no matter how small the steps might be. Give yourself generous praise for what you have survived, and how you have managed stressful situations and challenging transitions.



*Adapted from San Diego Hospice and Palliative Care's "Living With Grief Series."*

