

The Aftermath

Skills to Help Deal with Unending Feelings of Loss and Grief

Grief is not a problem to be solved. It is a testament to love — and navigating it takes time, patience, and compassion for yourself.

Understanding Grief

Grief is one of the most universal human experiences, yet it can feel profoundly isolating. It is important to understand from the outset that there is no correct way to grieve. People process loss differently, across vastly different timelines, shaped by culture, personality, relationship, and circumstance.

American culture often pressures people to move on quickly — to put the loss behind them and get back to living. **This expectation is not only unrealistic, it can be harmful.**

Grief is the internal experience of loss. Mourning is the outward expression of that grief. Both are natural, necessary, and worthy of respect.

How We Learn of a Death

When we first receive news of a loss — especially one that is sudden or unexpected — shock and denial are among the most common immediate responses. Disbelief sets in. The mind struggles to absorb information that feels incomprehensible. Confusion is normal. Numbness is normal. These are the psyche's protective responses, and they serve an important purpose in the early hours and days of grief.

What Shapes the Intensity of Grief

Not all losses feel the same. The depth of grief is shaped by many factors:

- The nature of the attachment and closeness of the relationship
- The age of the person who died
- The circumstances and manner of death
- Whether the loss was anticipated or sudden
- The void the person's absence creates in daily life
- Personal spiritual or religious beliefs
- Previous experiences with trauma or loss

The death of someone we love can also awaken our own fears about mortality and resurface grief from past losses. This layering of grief is normal and does not mean something is wrong with you.

Research confirms that grief activates the same neural pathways regardless of what was lost — a person, a pet, or even a cherished object. Your grief is valid, no matter its source.

What Is Complex Grief?

Complex grief — sometimes called prolonged grief disorder — is grief that does not ease with time. Rather than gradually softening, the pain remains acute, consuming, and disruptive to daily functioning. It is characterized by:

- Intense emotions that persist for months or years after the loss
- Intrusive, consuming thoughts about the person who died
- Difficulty accepting the reality of the loss
- An inability to re-engage with life, relationships, or activities
- A sense that life is meaningless or that part of you died with them

Complex grief is not a sign of weakness or abnormality. It is a recognized response that can affect anyone, and it often benefits from professional support to help move forward.

The Five Stages of Grief

The five-stage model of grief, originally developed by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, describes common emotional states that people may experience following a significant loss. These stages are not linear. You may move between them, revisit them, or experience several at once. They are a map, not a prescription.

1. Denial

Denial is the mind's first line of protection against overwhelming pain. When we cannot accept the reality of a loss, we instinctively push back against it. This may look like disbelief when receiving news of a death, questioning whether the information is accurate, emotional numbness, or even acting as though the loss has not happened — for example, continuing to set a place at the table for the person who has died.

Denial can surface immediately after a loss or reappear weeks and months later. It is not a failure of understanding; it is the heart buying time.

2. Anger

When denial can no longer hold, grief often transforms into anger. The depth of pain searches for somewhere to go. Anger may be directed at the person who died (“why did you leave me?”), at medical professionals, at God or a higher power, at a person perceived to be responsible for the death, or even at loved ones simply for being present. Anger can arrive without warning and may feel disproportionate to its apparent trigger.

Beneath the anger is almost always profound love and devastating loss. Both are true at once.

3. Bargaining

In bargaining, we attempt to negotiate our way out of the pain. We make promises to God, the universe, or ourselves in exchange for relief — “If you bring them back, I’ll be a better person.” We replay events in our minds, searching for what we could have done differently. We dwell in “what if” and “if only.” Bargaining can also occur in anticipatory grief — before a loss — when someone is pleading for more time or a different outcome.

Bargaining is a sign of how desperately we loved and how much we wish things were different.

4. Depression

As the reality of the loss fully settles in, a profound sadness often follows. This is not a sign of mental illness, but a natural and necessary part of grief. It may manifest as withdrawal from daily life, loss of energy, difficulty finding meaning or motivation, prolonged crying, and a sense

of emptiness that words cannot easily reach. When grief turns inward and is not processed, it can deepen into a state where engaging with life — work, relationships, activities — feels impossible.

This stage, though painful, is often where the deepest healing eventually begins.

5. Acceptance

Acceptance does not mean the loss no longer hurts. It does not mean you are “okay” with what happened. It means you have found a way to carry the loss forward without being crushed by it. You can remember the person you loved, still feel the sadness of their absence, and also hold joy or gratitude for the time you shared. Acceptance is not a destination you arrive at and stay; it fluctuates. There will be days of peace and days when the grief feels as raw as ever. Both are part of healing.

Acceptance is not the end of grief. It is the beginning of learning to live alongside it.

Reflection: Your Grief Journey

Take a moment to sit with the following questions. There are no right or wrong answers. These are invitations to better understand where you are right now.

Thinking about your current grief journey — which stage or stages do you find yourself in most often?

What thoughts or beliefs tend to arise when you are in that stage?

What do you think is keeping you anchored in that stage? What might it take to begin moving through it?

Navigating the Path Forward

Allow Yourself to Feel

Healing begins with acknowledgment. Give yourself permission to feel whatever arises — sadness, relief, anger, guilt, love, numbness. Grief rarely follows a tidy emotional sequence. You may feel contradictory things simultaneously, like relief that a loved one is no longer

suffering alongside deep sorrow at their absence. This is not inconsistency; it is the full complexity of love.

Your emotional attachment to someone you loved does not end when they die. Bereavement — the natural human process of healing from loss — takes the time it takes. Be patient with yourself.

Honoring the Memory

Part of surviving loss is honoring what the person meant to you. Acknowledge the ways they shaped your life, the gifts they gave you — lessons, laughter, love, perspective. From that foundation, you can begin to reengage with life not as a betrayal of their memory, but as a tribute to it.

It is also worth remembering: the grief response is not limited to the death of people. The loss of a pet, a beloved animal, or even a meaningful object can activate the same neural grief pathways. If your loss is one that others might minimize, know that your pain is no less real or legitimate.

Practical Steps to Help You Heal

Grief is not something to power through alone. The following actions can provide meaningful support as you move through complex grief:

1. **Forgive yourself.** You are not failing by still hurting. Allow yourself to be exactly where you are in the grieving process without judgment. Healing is not a performance.
2. **Talk to someone you trust.** Sharing your grief with a close, trusted person can reduce the isolation that grief so often creates. You don't need someone to fix anything — just someone to witness your pain without judgment.
3. **Join a grief support group.** Grief can feel uniquely lonely, as though no one else could possibly understand. A grief group connects you with others who are navigating similar pain. Hearing your experience reflected in others can be profoundly validating and healing.
4. **Seek a professional therapist.** Sometimes grief becomes a place we cannot find our way out of alone. A trained therapist can provide a structured, compassionate space to

process the emotions, thoughts, and patterns keeping you stuck — and to help you move forward with care.

You are not broken. You are grieving.

And grief, however long and however hard, is one of the most human things there is.