Grief and loss fundamentals
Getting to know grief
What is grief?

In general, grief is the normal and natural reaction to the experience of profound loss.

It is a powerful, unpredictable and sometimes uncontrollable state of being that ebbs and flows with no set duration.

It can affect us physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually.

Despite being a universal experience, each person’s grief response is unique, meaning there is no right or wrong way to grieve – even though sometimes we or others may feel there is a predictable, correct process of grief.
What is grief?

Grief is the normal and natural reaction to profound loss. It exists to enhance survival and is unique to each person.

Grief ebbs and flows with no set duration, causing temporary disruptions to life across our physical, emotional, mental and social spheres.

Everyone experiences grief
What is bereavement?

Bereavement refers to the period of grief and mourning following a death. It can feel like time is standing still for the bereaved person as they get caught up in memories of their loved one rather than looking to a future without them.
What is mourning?

Mourning is the outward expression of a person’s private grief, usually informed by their religious, cultural, spiritual and societal beliefs and practices. It is a therapeutic process that pays tribute to the loss, symbolises the mourner’s thoughts and feelings, and provides structure to their grief.

How does it look?

Participation in rituals such as funerals, attending memorial sites, posting one’s grief journey on social media, religious practices such as wearing black and set periods of mourning.
Types of grief
Types of grief

Grief comes in many forms.

It might take hold instantly or be delayed, feel intense or mild, be short or protracted. It all depends on a multitude of factors such as the griever's childhood and family background, previous life experiences, mental health, social and cultural influences, the type of loss and in the case of bereavement, the mode of death.

Let's look at some of the grief responses that are not widely understood yet affect many in our community.
Ambiguous grief

A type of grief that occurs when the valued person is physically present but psychologically or emotionally absent or changed.

**Examples are loved ones:**
- in the grip of addiction,
- with Alzheimer’s,
- with mental health disorders
- with acquired brain injuries
Disenfranchised grief

A loss that isn’t acknowledged and validated by society or is undisclosed for fear of judgement or criticism.

Grief symptoms are often exacerbated due to a lack of public mourning and rituals.

Examples are:

• a child surrendered for adoption,
• rape,
• pregnancy termination
• the death of an undisclosed partner
• pet loss
• Incarcerated family member
Cumulative grief is experiencing multiple losses within a short period of time.

An example could be the sudden loss of a loved one followed by the loss of a pet, and then the loss of a financial security and your home.
Compounding grief is when all of your grief from over a lifetime gets compromised and then causes you to spiral downward over one tragic event, such as death.

Often when experiencing compounding grief, the person does not have time to process one loss before incurring another.

Some groups of people may be at greater risk of experiencing grief than others such as:

- People living with addiction
- People who lack social support
- People routinely exposed to trauma
- Older people
Prolonged grief

This ongoing and persistent form of intense grief affects about 1 in 10 of the grieving population.

Prolonged grief can impair a person’s daily functioning and poses significant risks to long-term physical and mental health.

Examples of what may cause prolonged grief include:

- the circumstances of the death such as suicide,
- sudden or violent death,
- a protracted illness
- loss of a child
Anticipatory grief is a response to impending loss marked by feelings of dread and anxiety.

It often affects people

- facing the death of a loved one with a life-threatening illness
- battling addiction
- LGBTQIA+/hetero identity
- an elderly relative or pet
- someone succumbing to dementia
- family breakdown and separation
Recognising loss in all its forms
Understanding loss

A loss involves change and a sense of realisation that a valued or cherished aspect of life has gone in the way we once knew it.

Whilst most Australians understand the link between the loss of a loved one and grief, they are less likely to connect grief to non-death losses. Yet both can cause a grief response of similar intensity.

When someone experiences a "living loss", the thing that dies might be their hopes or dreams, a relationship, or an ability that has escaped them.
Both death-related and non-death related losses can cause a grief response of similar intensity.
Grief arises from the loss of one or more deep-seated human needs.

Source: McKinsey & Company
The impact of grief
Common experiences of grief

Grief impacts people on multiple levels.

**SOCially:**
- withdrawn and isolated, avoiding people and places,
- change of faith or beliefs, obsessing over what is lost.

**BIologically:**
- heart racing,
- shortness of breath,
- nausea, sleeplessness,
- lethargy, changes to appetite, lack of focus, physical pain.

**PSYCHOlogically:**
- rollercoaster of emotions; shock, overwhelm, confusion, helplessness,
- despair, guilt, rage, denial, depression, restlessness, relief.
Responses to grief

Although grief and loss affects us all very differently, there are some common responses, such as:

- Separation distress (helplessness, pain, disruption)
- Traumatic distress (shock, feeling overwhelmed, the experience not being linked to any meaning, intrusive thoughts, feelings and thoughts that you are on an emotional rollercoaster)
- Helplessness (feeling paralysed and the thought or feeling that you do not have control)
- Guilt, remorse and shame
- Loneliness
- Anger and denial
- Melancholy, crying, sadness and depression
- Anxiousness
- Relief
- Yearning to change the past or the future
- Insomnia and general sleep disturbances
Pathological grief symptoms

General ill health with increased symptoms eg: a decline in health or the help-seeker reports symptomology experienced by the deceased

**Psychosomatic disorders** eg: a range of these may develop in response to stress or inner conflict (change in immune cell functions)

**Psychiatric disorders** - psychiatric conditions such as anxiety states/phobias/mania (often around anniversaries of loss) and acting out behaviours (drug or alcohol use, stealing, promiscuity), altered relationship patterns - such as over-protectiveness, avoiding relationships with potential pain or loss, compulsive caregiving or increased over investment in new relationships
Pathological grief symptoms cont’d

**Vulnerability to loss** - poorly resolved bereavement can lead to vulnerability to stress or loss

**Anniversary phenomena** - significant anniversaries associated with the loss may reactivate the grieving process

**Correspondence phenomena** - they may be vulnerable on reaching the age at which the person died

**Death** - mortality may follow bereavement through stress or disturbance associated with loss eg: death from a ‘broken heart’ or suicide
Sleep disturbances

Changes in sleep pattern
Night-time routines can be impacted, with some people putting off going to bed and staying up until the early hours of the morning and then sleeping for a substantial part of the following day or napping during the day and not being able to sleep at night.

Trouble getting to sleep
Some people have difficulties falling asleep and find themselves tossing and turning or just lying there and staring at the ceiling or they find themselves thinking, worrying or planning, which results in their body going into a state of muscle tension, which then results in remaining awake.

Trouble staying asleep
Some people find themselves waking up overnight without a reason, waking up too early and unable to go back to sleep or waking up in the morning feeling tired, unfreshened, with many people describing the sensation of having run a marathon overnight and feeling very unrested.
The journey of grief
The KUBLER-ROSS MODEL

The Kubler-Ross Model of the Five Stages of Grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – was developed back in 1969 and was originally intended for people who were dying – not grieving.

It became a very popular theory and it’s still the model that most people think of when they think of grief today.

These are all integral states of being for many people who are grieving, however the fact is that not everyone experiences each of those states and it’s not standard that people will experience them in chronological order. It’s important to remember that there is no right or wrong way to grieve.

Everyone’s process is unique, and they shouldn’t be judged for not grieving the way society expects them to.
STAGES OF GRIEF

Shock / Denial
Disorder
Anger
Guilt & Bargaining
Distress
Acceptance
Withdrawal
Loneliness
Depression

REALITY

Shock
Denial
Depression
Bargaining
Withdrawal
Disorder
Anger
Distress
Guilt
Loneliness

Acceptance
Guilt
Disorder
Loneliness
Depression
Acceptance
Disorder
Loneliness
Distress

@ 2023 Griefline
People who have suffered a loss go through a constantly changing process of grief.

And while the heartache ebbs and flows for each person, there are some common responses at different parts of the grief journey.

The grief journey can be broken down into early, middle and later grief.
After a while, the griever might struggle with a sense of emptiness and finality. They may develop a desperate need for the return of what was lost. And become preoccupied with telling their story of loss and saying their loved one’s name.

Later in the grieving process, the griever may start to adapt to an altered life, discovering new strengths and opportunities that weren’t there before. Life starts to have meaning again. They may even experience personal growth and a re-invention of who they once were.
The Grief Journey

WORDEN’S FOUR TASKS OF MOURNING


Healing occurs progressively as grievers address these tasks in no specific order, going back and forth from one to another over time, since grief is not linear.

Worden's four tasks of mourning

Task 1: Accept the reality of the loss
Task 2: Process the pain of grief
Task 3: Adjust to a world without the deceased
Task 4: Help the survivors find an appropriate place for the deceased in their emotional life

Coping with grief
Coping with grief

Robert A. Neimeyer, Ph.D.M is one of the foremost authorities on bereavement and grief.

In the “Coping with grief” section of this module, we share some tips and techniques which can be shared with a grieving person that we have adapted from Dr Robert Neimeyer’s text: *Techniques of grief therapy: assessment and intervention.*
Coping with grief

SEEKING COMFORT FROM OTHERS

Often when consumed by grief, people turn from the one thing that might them most - other people.

This may be because they feel that no one understands them, that it is something they need to face on their own, or that they are a burden to others.

While these are all valid concerns, the benefits for a grieving person to share their pain with another, almost always overrides the drawbacks.
Coping with grief

SEEKING COMFORT FROM OTHERS CONT’D

● Reach out to family, friends, workmates, community members etc. but permit yourself to retreat when you need to be alone.

● Take the initiative to reach out to new people who have experienced a similar loss – they might be from social groups, sporting clubs, church groups, in the workplace or internet forums. It’s a good idea to make a list of these groups to turn to when you’re feeling overwhelmed.

● Force yourself to be around people and do things – even when it feels too hard. Try to have at least one thing in your calendar every day, along with a back-up.

● Allow yourself to grieve in public – it’s perfectly ok to have a cry.

● Share your story of loss. Go ahead and tell anyone who will listen about your loved one and your relationship even if they don’t have the words to respond.
Coping with grief

SEEKING COMFORT FROM OTHERS CONT’D

- Give and receive random acts of kindness and tell others how much you admire, respect or love them.
- Care for others where you can such as your children and elders or pets and animals.
- Engage in faith, religion or spirituality if that is part of your life.
- Seek help from organised, supportive bereavement services such as retreats, group therapy and online forums (click through for the Griefline online forums). You may find one specific to the cause of death such as cancer or suicide groups, or to the type of loss such as a spouse, child, parent.
- Seek help from mental health professionals if needed, including counsellors or psychologists.
- Increase your awareness about grief – there are many educational, relatable and even inspiring books written by professionals or regular people with lived experience.
Coping with grief

TAKING CARE OF MENTAL, EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

Sometimes grief brings on confusing, surprising and often unfounded thoughts and feelings.

The grieving might feel that they don’t know who they are anymore, experience shame or guilt, even feel like they’re losing the will to live.

As a result, they can stop looking after themselves. But can often start to see things more clearly and move through these dark thoughts by taking care of their health.
Coping with grief

TAking care of mental, emotional and physical health

Here are some tips for self-care to share with a person who is grieving:

Suggest they adapt old routines to the changes in their life, while establishing new daily routines that see them accessing a healthy diet, good hygiene, adequate sleep, and are attending to their medical care.

They may enjoy reconnecting to physical activities such exercise and movement. This can be low intensity such as a gentle walk, yoga or tai chi or more vigorous such as returning to the gym, running, even dance...there are many ways to move your body.
Coping with grief

Are they being kind to themselves?

- Remember that our minds require time to heal as well. Self-forgiveness can be helpful, particularly at times when the grieving is feeling confused, distracted, making mistakes or having trouble remembering things.
- It is helpful to avoid excessive consumption of alcohol, prescription or illicit drugs, smoking and caffeine.
- Rather than avoiding life engage in it through meaningful activities such as work, hobbies, sports, arts and crafts.
- Gently suggest that they allow themselves to pursue positive emotions and to feel compassion for themselves and others and be open to love, happiness, laughter, gratitude and hope.
Coping with grief

TAKING CARE OF MENTAL, EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH CONT’D

Other ways the grieving can show themselves kindness and compassion are to:

● Identify and name their feelings. Rather than avoiding them or fighting them, try to accept them and slowly they will become easier to manage.

● When negative emotions arise, suggest they try mood-regulating techniques such as mindfulness, slow breathing or prayer (there are Mindfulness exercises on the Griefline website here).

● Let them know that they can give themselves permission to cry and give words to their distressing emotions. Work towards distinguishing grief from other feelings such as fear, uncertainty, guilt, shame and anger.
Coping with grief

TAKING CARE OF MENTAL, EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH
CONT’D

- Express their thoughts and feelings. They can use the written word such as journaling, poetry or letter writing, or other expressive ways such as painting, photography, scrapbooking, dance and music.
- Practice gratitude exercises. This can help remind themselves how grateful they are for the time spent with their lost one or how thankful they are for the love and support from others. It’s often helpful to tell them too.
- Suggest that they create a safe and comforting space for themselves. This can be in real life or in their imagination the Reflecting on Positive Experiences mindfulness exercise on the Griefline website here is a good example).
Coping with grief

CONTINUING THE BOND WITH A LOVED ONE

Sometimes the grieving can stop themselves from forming an enduring connection with their lost loved one because they fear what others will think of them or feel guilt, shame, humiliation or disgust.

They may even feel anger or have thoughts of revenge.

However, establishing a different form of connection with their loved one even though they have passed away has been shown to bring considerable relief.
Coping with grief

CONTINUING THE BOND WITH A LOVED ONE, WHILE COMING TO ACCEPT THAT THEY HAVE GONE

Here are some tips for continuing the bond:

- When they are ready, they could visit their loved one’s grave or memorial site, hold a candlelight vigil, organise a public memorial or celebrate special occasions such as their birthday or wedding anniversary.

- Commemorate them with an honouring space at home. This might be a small ‘shrine’ with candles and photos, a memory box, meditation space or photo-board. Whatever works for them. This is a place they can go to any time.

- They could become involved in a cause that was important to their loved one. Perhaps they could further their mission or attain their charitable goal.
Coping with grief

CONTINUING THE BOND WITH A LOVED ONE

Here are some tips for continuing the bond (cont’d):

- Create a legacy in their loved one’s name. This might be planting and nurturing a tree, starting or maintaining their Facebook page, sponsoring a plaque on a park bench, starting a charity, scholarship or awareness campaign.

- Encourage them to talk to their loved one and be open to signs from them.

- They can write their lost loved one letters, sharing their ups and downs, ask for advice, seek forgiveness if they need. Many people also answer as they think their loved one would, which can be very soothing and helpful.

- Come to accept that they will carry the grief and sadness with them from here on with different intensities yet over time it will become more manageable.
Coping with grief

ESTABLISHING SAFETY AND BUILDING SELF-EMPOWERMENT

The grieving can be consumed with thoughts that cause fear and avoidance and make them believe things will never get better or that they should never be happy again.

But there are ways to feel safe and strong again.
Coping with grief

ESTABLISHING SAFETY AND BUILDING SELF-EMPOWERMENT CONT’D

Here are some tips for feeling safe and in control:

● Know that there is no quick-fix and that the process of grieving will take time and patience. They should allow themselves time to heal.

● Ask them to identify what triggers them and figure out ways to limit their exposure to these, whether it be certain people, places or things, until they can approach and process them in their own time. Encourage them to say ‘no’ when they need to.

● Help them to recognise important activities, places or things that they are avoiding and slowly reintroduce them if they can or, if they are impossible to overcome, maybe omit them from their life for good. Remind them to give themselves time before they make any big and lasting decisions.
Coping with grief

ESTABLISHING SAFETY AND BUILDING SELF-EMPOWERMENT CONT’D

- Help them to identify their strengths and remind themselves of the challenges they have overcome before this. They can change their self-image from a ‘victim’ to a ‘survivor’ and even a ‘thriver’.

- Suggest they note down coping strategies on post-it notes to turn to when they’re struggling. Get them to stick them to high-use items such as their computer, steering wheel or fridge.

- They could start a coping diary in which they rate each day between 1 and 10 according to how well they’ve coped. Asking themselves what they can do to increase their score and work on increasing the number of good days compared to bad.

- Remember, they always have choices no matter how hard things seem. They don’t have to settle to thinking “it is what it is”.

@ 2023 Griefline
Coping with grief

ESTABLISHING SAFETY AND BUILDING SELF-EMPOWERMENT CONT’D

Help them to avoid “time-sliding” into the past using these four steps:

1. Ground themselves into the present by becoming aware of their surroundings,
2. Change their self-talk. Ask them to tell themself “I am safe and this will pass,”
3. Regulate their physical reactions through slow-breathing,
4. Turn to people’s faces, voices or touch or contact a friend for reassurance.
Coping with grief

GAINING A HEALTHY FUTURE OUTLOOK

As people start to move through their grief, they might come up against misleading beliefs that stall or regress their healing.

They may believe their recovery means they are dishonouring their loved one or that they are leaving them behind or even that their love is fading.

However, by moving towards a better future, they are surely honouring their loved one’s hopes and dreams for them.
Coping with grief

GAINING A HEALTHY FUTURE OUTLOOK CONT’D

Here are some tips for gaining strength and moving forward:

● Suggest they take steps to taking control of their future by setting goals – short, mid and long-term – which can help them find a sense of purpose and hope for a meaningful life.

● Re-establish a sense of identity. Even though their life has changed the essence of them has not...help them consider their values and create action plans that align with these.

● Help them to create purpose by keeping the memory of their loved one alive ...transform their grief into meaning-making endeavours to ensure good comes out of the loss. This might be lobbying to change a law, holding a fund-raiser, or simply telling their story to raise awareness. There are many different options.
Coping with grief

GAINING A HEALTHY FUTURE OUTLOOK CONT’D

● Show them that their beliefs can bring them comfort and hope. They might believe that their loved one is looking down on them and keeping them safe until they are reunited, or that they are no longer suffering and at peace, or perhaps that their legacy will live on and inspire others...these beliefs are integral to their enduring connection.

● Help them come to understand that their grief journey is unique to them and differs from other people’s and that their personal grief process can help them map out their further progress towards meaning, hope and growth.
Supporting others

Being there during grief

• Recognise their pain and loss
• Offer steady support
• Talk about it
• Expect the unexpected
• Remain by their side
Supporting others

Being there during grief

When someone you know experiences loss, it’s instinctive to want to help them.

But caring for a grieving person can be challenging. Knowing how to be there for them while looking after yourself is important. It’s also important to remember that while all the care in the world won’t undo their grief, you can support them as they work through it.
Supporting others

Recognise their pain and loss

People need their grief to be witnessed. Life is full of ups and downs and it’s important to be there to witness both. If you can, attend the funeral, memorial or farewell ceremony to show you witness their sadness and grief. And in the months after, gestures such as flowers, a message, or a visit is an easy way to show you still acknowledge what’s happened to them.
Supporting others

Offer steady support

Consistent and thoughtful support means taking some of the burden of decision-making onto yourself. Instead of asking the grieving person what they need, ask others in their support system or decide the best course of action for yourself.
Supporting others

Talk about it

It can be daunting to find the right thing to say but you should always try, even if you don’t get it right. If you’re lost for words, remember to avoid platitudes and say things you truly mean. Instead of saying “Time heals all wounds”, you could be more honest and say “I can’t imagine what you’re going through”.
Supporting others

Expect the unexpected

All experiences of grief are different and it’s not unusual for grieving to include bursts of anger, anxiety, fear, guilt, and shame. Reassure them that whatever they feel is normal and doesn’t need to be justified or explained.
Supporting others

Remain by their side

Grief can play out unevenly. Remember that while the grieving person might seem better, their feelings can change day-to-day. Stay with them, it might be months or even years later that they need you the most.
Griefline resources

Listed below are a range of resources available on the Griefline website to read to develop your own knowledge and to share with others seeking information and support:

- How to support a grieving friend ebook
- Fact sheets in English and six other languages. Subjects include Coping with grief, Caring for someone who is grieving, Natural disasters and grief, Losing a pet, Loneliness and grief
- The Grief and loss resource hub on the Griefline website features a raft of articles covering all topics relating to grief and loss including Community stories, COVID-19, First Responders, Loneliness and Isolation, Self-care and Wellbeing and Stressful or Traumatic events.

As a service to our community, Griefline provides access to resources to support and inform help-seekers and their carers through their experience with grief and loss. The content we share is for educational purposes only and should not substitute direct medical advice from a GP or other qualified mental health clinician.
Third-party resources

The information shared in this presentation is general in nature. Below is a list of third-party support resources covering specific grief and loss circumstances.

- Standby Support: Workplace toolkit – workplace response to suicide
- Standby Support: Checklist – support for an employee bereaved by suicide
- SANDS: Words Matter Guide for Family, Friends and Colleagues in Starting a Conversation about Pregnancy or Infant Loss
- Good Grief: Seasons for Growth Young People & Grief
- Australian Indigenous Health Info Net: Social and Emotional Wellbeing – Grief, Loss and Trauma
- Red Nose: Supporting colleagues to return to work following the loss of a baby or child

Griefline is not a crisis-support or emergency support service
For 24-hour telephone crisis support call Lifeline 13 11 14, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people call 13YARN 13 92 76. Kids Helpline is available 24/7 to support young people aged five to 25 call 1800 551 800
Hang on, I have a question...

- Jot down any questions and bring them to the Practicing Conversations workshop
- Please email the Volunteer Support Team
- Our motto is always – Be Present, Not Perfect
- Remember there is no such thing as a stupid question, we are all learning and the smart option is to ask so you can feel confident and ready to help
OUR ONLINE PRESENCE

Please click the icon to follow, like and engage.