

Coping with grief and loss



Relationships Australia®

VICTORIA

TIP SHEET

What is grief?

Grief is intense sadness. It's our response to a loss and is about processing our feelings about what has changed in our lives.

You may experience grief when:

- someone you love dies
- someone you love is diagnosed with a serious or terminal illness or disability
- you or your parents separate or divorce
- there's a natural disaster in your community
- your pet dies
- you or someone you love has to move to a different school, house, job, city or country
- a relationship with a friend, partner or family member changes or ends
- you experience a significant life change. This might include a change to your health, living arrangements and/or a loss of possessions.

Different forms of grief

Complicated grief

This is when complex factors relating to the loss get in the way of grieving. For example, if a loved one is hospitalised due to mental illness, a relationship changes because of addiction, or a family member discloses child abuse or family violence. This may also bring up strong feelings like anger or shame, which can make the situation hard to talk about.

Vicarious grief

Vicarious grief occurs when we hear about someone else's grief experience and feel it as if it were our own. Sometimes this can happen when we see something sad, such as a death or natural disaster on the news, or hear about another person's loss.

Anticipatory grief

Anticipatory grief is felt when we know that a loss is coming, for example when someone is diagnosed with a terminal illness, and we begin to experience grief before the loss happens.

What does grief look like?

Grieving is an individual process. Everybody grieves differently and for different lengths of time.

As long as you're not causing harm to yourself or others around you, there's no 'right' way to grieve. It's important to respect a person's way of grieving even if it's different to yours.

During grief people may feel shock, numbness, intense sadness, anger, guilt, resentment, relief, panic and fear. Feelings tend to come in waves and can be quite unexpected.

At different times, the waves might vary between feeling really overwhelming and feeling more manageable. It's also not unusual to feel numb, like you have no feelings at all.

Grief can also cause physical symptoms like disruptions to your appetite or sleeping patterns, headaches or nausea. It can affect some people's thinking or ability to concentrate. Grief can also interrupt your usual routine and you might find that you get sick more often.

Your grieving process might include one or more of the following.



Add your own:

9 tips for coping with grief

1. Accept that grief doesn't follow a timetable or have a set end date. It's unpredictable and may come and go in waves, often in unexpected moments.

Take each day as it comes and try not to think too far ahead.



2. Allow yourself to feel your grief and know that whatever you're feeling is okay.

Try writing down your thoughts each day to help process and understand them.



3. Reach out to people you trust for support. Talking about your feelings and experiences can help you to process your grief in the long term. It can be hard to get started, but if you feel you need support, find a trusted person to talk to.



4. Consider ceremonies, rituals, memorials or remembrance meals or events. These can allow you to share your memories, stories and feelings with people who care for you. They can also be markers for a new phase in your life.



5. Try to keep your usual routine as this can help you to feel more stable. Maintain your set times for eating, exercise and sleep.



6. Do things you like doing and spend time with people you feel comfortable with. Give yourself permission to 'take a break from grief' and do something relaxing and enjoyable. It doesn't mean that you don't care or aren't still grieving, just that you're looking after yourself.



7. Keep active. If you regularly exercise, try and keep your usual routine. If you're not someone who regularly exercises, try starting with just a 10-minute walk around your local area. Research shows that exercise can help with managing grief, loss, anxiety and depression.



8. Look after your body and remember to eat, even if you don't feel like it. Try to eat fruits and vegetables, and avoid relying on caffeine, alcohol or drugs.



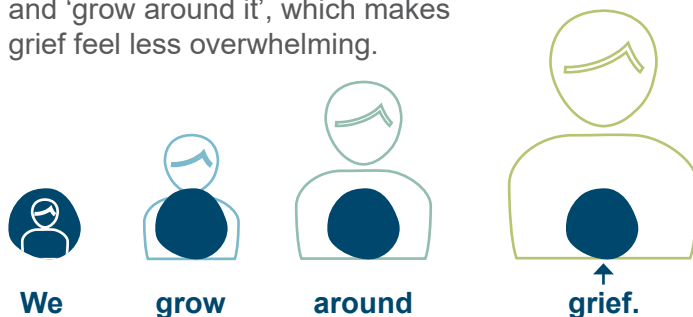
9. Seek professional help if you're feeling stuck or overwhelmed. Deciding to get help can sometimes be tough, but it's a brave step in dealing with grief and loss.



Does grief ever end?

Many people find that their feelings of grief become less intense over time. This doesn't mean your grief goes away, or you forget why you were grieving or who for. It just means that your experience of grief changes. It's okay for you to continue living your life and experiencing joy, while still feeling your grief whenever and however it shows up for you.

Paths of processing grief don't follow a straight line and it's not unusual to experience new or increased feelings of grief many months or years after a loss. This can happen at unexpected times or around key events or anniversaries. Professionals often talk about the idea of 'growing around grief' (Tonkin, 1996)¹. This means that, rather than our grief shrinking or disappearing, we have new experiences and 'grow around it', which makes grief feel less overwhelming.



Need more help?

If you need support, help is available.

To make an appointment to talk to one of our counsellors, visit rav.org.au/counselling

The following organisations also support people who are experiencing grief and loss.

- Griefline: [1300 845 745](https://griefline.org.au) or griefline.org.au
- Grief Australia: Visit grief.org.au

If you or someone you know is in danger, phone emergency services now on 000 (triple zero).

For crisis support, phone:

- Lifeline on [13 11 14](https://lifeline.org.au)
- SuicideLine Victoria on [1300 651 251](https://suicideline.vic.gov.au)
- Beyond Blue on [1300 22 4636](https://beyondblue.org.au)
- MensLine Australia on [1300 78 99 78](https://mensline.org.au)
- Kids Helpline on [1800 55 1800](https://kids.helpline.org.au)

¹ <https://doi.org/10.1080/02682629608657376>

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