

Grief's Journey



Talking about your feelings with someone you trust can be a real release of tension and a way to gain perspective on your loss and grief. Sometimes, however, you may be uncomfortable talking about this with others; your listener may not be available or you simply may not be able to speak.

Who do you talk to at midnight after you have tossed and turned for hours, too restless for sleep? What do you do during the day when you are too anxious, confused, or upset to talk?

It can help to express yourself in writing. Writing your feelings and thoughts in a journal can bring comfort and insight. If you are new to journal writing and particularly if writing has been difficult in the past, this issue's information may help you start.

Words aren't adequate to express some feelings. Whether or not you keep a journal, you may feel the need for some other form of expression. If you already paint, sing, or play a musical instrument, you can use this talent to express your feelings.

Whether through talking, writing, painting, singing, drawing, or sculpting clay, self-expression can help transform your pain into growth and meaning. Art isn't only for artists; it is for everyone who feels the need to create something new out of their loss. As you express yourself more and more freely, you may be amazed at the healing power that flows from you. Open yourself to the creative part of you that can bring some comfort and peace at this important time.

Our Needs During Grief

When you experience the death of someone you love, your whole perspective of life can change. Pay attention to the special needs you may have during your grief and mourning process. You may become acutely aware of time. Time becomes precious and you may find that you want to spend it wisely. It helps to make time to be with people you trust, who will listen when you need to talk. You also need time to get to know yourself better and to process all that has happened. You may need months and years of time to understand the feelings that go along with loss.

Pay particular attention to your body and its needs. Get plenty of rest and relaxation. When you grieve, you work overtime and need extra amounts of the things that are rejuvenating and nurturing. Since mourning is an exhausting process both emotionally and physically, you will need to replenish yourself. Do the things that feel healing to you and that connect you to the people and things you love.

The death of a loved one will push you to make necessary changes and decisions. When making these decisions, you need to feel secure. Rely on people you trust – a family member, friend or colleague – to help you through these first difficult decisions. If you have a problem and don't know where to turn (for example, a plumbing problem or a financial issue) turn to the people you trust for referrals to people they trust. Beware of being pushed into things before you are ready or before you understand them fully.



For a while, it may feel impossible to put any structure into your life again. It may seem that there is not meaning or reason to go on with life. At these times, small goals help. Having something to look forward to, like going to lunch or to a movie, helps you to get through the immediate future. Live one day at a time: it's a cliché but it works. Initially, you may find it painful to go out but in time it will become easier and more enjoyable. As the months pass, you may choose to work on more long range goals to give added structure and direction to your life.

Don't underestimate or deprive yourself of the therapeutic value of simple pleasures. Sunsets, a walk on the beach, a long hot bath, soothing music – these pleasures can help renew your emotional investment in life. Try to banish guilt from your grieving. It can be an enemy by making you feel that it is wrong to laugh or feel pleasure and enjoy any part of life again.

Sometimes after you have felt good for some time, you may find yourself stepping back into feelings of sadness, despair or anger. This is the nature of mourning; it goes up and down and it usually repeats itself. Your emotions return because you can't take in all of the pain and life changes at once. Instead, you let in a little at a time. Recognize that your grief heals gradually and give yourself permission to backslide. Remember, backsliding is not the same as regression.

In some circumstances medication can be prescribed to help people through the most traumatic, incapacitating period of grief, especially if they have been taken for emotional or mental health problems. Most of the time, however, drugs that deaden feelings should be avoided or used in moderation. Although they may temporarily relieve some of the pain, in the long run, even when necessary, they may delay or extend the healing process. Alcohol is a drug that also fits into this category. Remember, we cannot prevent or cure grief. The only way out is through it.

Journal Keeping

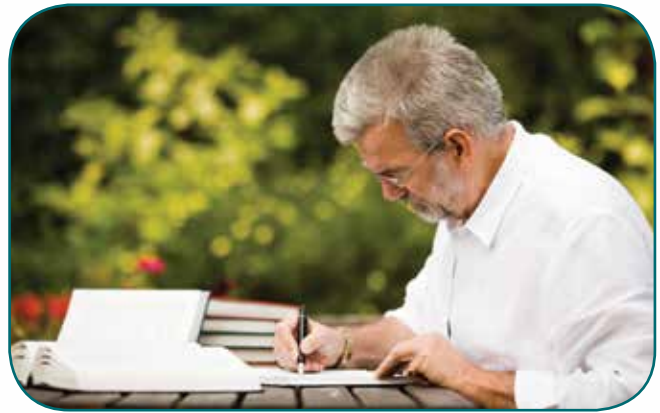
In recent years, journaling has become a popular tool for coping with many kinds of stress and inner conflicts. It is a technique that you can use to sort and vent your feelings, identify issues that are creating stress and provide insights for problems solving and the resolution of relationship issues.

Journaling is different from keeping a diary. When you journal, you write about and examine your inner processes – what's going on inside of you – rather than your external environment.

When journaling; you may record feelings, thoughts, anxieties, fears, joys, concerns and how you deal with them. You may also record what you feel are the outside sources of your feelings (for example, an argument or loss) but focus on how you process the experience internally.

To help start your journaling process, you may want to ask yourself and answer some questions:

- Did I over or under-react to a situation?
- Am I allowing my perceptions to be colored by emotion?
- Do I recall past events with the present experience?
- Are my feelings, especially fears, so strong that they override my ability to think correctly?
- What experience determines my reactions? Is this a constant pattern? A new pattern? A lost pattern?



When Journaling,

Consider These Tips:

- Complete sentences and attention to grammar are not necessary. Often a phrase or even just a word is adequate to record the experience.
- Date every entry.
- Use the free-flowing method. Jot down your thoughts and feelings as they occur without censoring.
- Review your entries periodically to give yourself feedback about your flow of thought and feelings. When you review your entries, you can gain insight about how you are progressing.
- When you reread entries (immediately or at a later time) don't edit them. If you want to add notes or comments to prior entries, use another color ink or pencil so you can see how you have changed over time. Also add the date of your additions.
- Make your entries as regular as possible. Daily entries will enable you to track and process your experience more completely than haphazard or less frequent entries. Weekly entries can help you see large patterns of responses and

marked changes. Entries less frequent than weekly usually are less helpful as you track your experiences. Less frequent entries also don't give you much data for insight. However, even sporadic efforts can help you vent feelings and sort out thoughts which can lend clarity to a particular situation.

- Journaling is very central to you and should be treated with the utmost respect and confidentiality. Don't feel pressured by others to let them read your journal unless you want to share it.

Parent's Corner

Most often, children show their grief through their behavior; they act out their grief. Many new problems such as increased withdrawal, clinging, day dreaming, fights, decreased concentration, changes in eating or sleeping patterns, and dropping grades, as well as the recurrence of old problems may be symptoms of grief.

Children need to be assured again and again that they will survive their loss. They can be reassured in three ways: how we are, what we say and what we do.

The most important way to reassure children is by how we are. Children learn how to grieve by watching you grieve. You are their role model. It is important for them to see that you can grieve without being destroyed and to see you taking care of yourself in your grief. Getting help when you need it gives your children the permission they need to reach out for support.

When an expert in child raising was asked what three things parents could do that would help them be good parents, the reply was "listen, listen, listen". This is never truer than when children are grieving. A listening attitude is conveyed by being patient, respectful and empathic. By adopting this attitude, you give your children a safe place where they can share and work through their feelings and create their own understanding. By listening, you validate and normalize their feelings and also can correct any misconceptions they may have about the death.

It is important to be aware of the expectations you have of your own children. Children may feel compelled to step into some of the roles the deceased played in the home. One common example is the young son who tries to be the man in the house.

Reassure your child that he is not expected to fill this role.

Just as your behavior can reassure children, what you say can decrease their isolation. It is important to be honest, direct and open with children and to speak to their age level. You don't need to tell them more than they can take in and understand at this time.

Because of the children's need to regain their sense of control, it is important to follow their lead when discussing their grief. They are more likely to open up when they feel in control of the timing and content of the conversation. Remember, children deal with their grief in small doses. Don't be concerned if they talk about issues close to them for a brief time and then either change the subject or go out and play.



There are several reasons to talk with children about the person who died. Talking about the deceased allows that person to stay in their hearts and memories. Talking also lets you clear up any misconceptions about the death that the children may have. For example, one child felt he caused his Grandmother's death by arguing with his Mom. This misunderstanding was cleared up easily by talking about what really caused his Grandmother's death.

Children often want to know concrete details about death and dying. When they ask, answer honestly and directly. Call your local hospice or mortuary if you would like more information. It is all right to say you do not know the answer.

**If you have questions or would like more information,
please contact us at (866) 310-8900 or visit www.HopeWestCO.org.**

What can you do to reassure your children? Include them if possible when you discuss things that affect them, such as holiday rituals and memorials. Visit the cemetery or where the ashes have been scattered if your child wants to. Encourage artwork, such as drawing or clay to help them express their feelings. Help them construct a memory book about the person who died, include photos, drawings, funeral and obituary notices, memorabilia, short stories, favorite foods, movies, TV shows, jokes, family events and poetry. Older children may find a journal to be a valuable tool.

Talk to teachers, school counselors, church members and leaders of any of your child's clubs so they understand that any changes in their behavior are an expression of grief. It is important to maintain routines with consistent structure and physical nurturance (hugs, food, vitamins, rest and exercise). If you are concerned about any of your child's behaviors or reactions, you may want to contact your local hospice or a school counselor for referrals to children's grief programs in your area.

Write a Letter

A powerful way to journal is to write a letter to the person who died. When you write one of these letters, you can get in touch with your feelings and release some of your pain by "talking" to your loved one. You may want to use the letter to finish or complete something that you may have left undone or unsaid. This exercise may seem a little strange at first but many people find this to be extremely valuable.



Topics that you may want to address can include:

- A special memory you have about your loved one;
- What you miss most about your loved one and your relationship;
- What you wish you had or hadn't said;
- What you would like to ask your loved one;
- What you wish you had or hadn't done;

- What you've had the hardest time dealing with;
- Ways your loved one will continue to live on in you;
- Special ways you have for keeping your memories and;
- How you've grown through this profound experience.

Choose one or several ideas that have significance for you, or start at the top of the list and work your way down. These topics may help you come up with ideas specific to your situations and relationship.

Then write a second letter answering the questions or issues in your first letter, telling yourself what you imagine your loved one would say.

Writing these letters may bring up painful, even frightening feelings. However, getting these feelings out is helpful and healing. When you speak or write about your pain, you take the opportunity to release it.

You may find even more healing by reading your letter to someone you trust who will listen without judging you or giving you advice.

*“The world breaks everyone
and afterward many are strong
at the broken places...”*

– Ernest Hemingway, A Farewell to Arms

Secondary Losses

Secondary losses are losses that develop as a consequence of the death. They can be physical losses of such things as home other people or a specific environment; “When my Dad died, my Stepmother also moved away and I didn't have the opportunity to grieve with her or to support her in person”.

They can also be symbolic; such as a loss of dreams, a loss of our future as we had planned, a loss of status or identity, or a loss of expectations.

Depending upon one's situation, secondary losses can be more apparent after a passage of time and may account for a resurgence of new grief as we get in touch with the impact on us. Other losses may include a loss of independence – such as when the survivor is frail, perhaps also ill and was cared for by the person who died. That person now perhaps can no longer be about and care for herself independently.



Other symbolic losses may be loss of autonomy, control, predictability, self-esteem and mobility. All must be grieved individually and together and must be acknowledged as part of our overall grief work.

*“Unless you can tell me what you didn’t like,
as well as what you liked,
you’re not going through the grieving process.”*

– Earl Grollman



Practical Suggestions for Journaling

Choose a journal that suits you – big or small, 79 cents or \$10.00 variety, lined or unlined, soft or hardbound.

You can write:

- Feelings
- Thoughts
- Stories
- Prayers
- Poems
- Even swear words!

Record daily experiences:

- Highs and lows
- Significant events
- What was different about today
- What made me laugh, cry or angry
- Moments of wonder
- Important conversation
- How I feel supported
- Brag about triumphs
- Confess shortcomings
- Fears

Make lists of:

- Nurturing experiences
- Coping behaviors that work for me
- Things I treasure most
- What continues to be relevant in my life
- Things I really want to do someday
- Goals, wishes
- Fears
- Strengths
- Weaknesses
- What I like about me
- What I want to change

Write for your eyes only:

- Be playful. It’s okay to get a little “goofy;” it’s okay to have fun.
- Journal writing is therapy, not drudgery!

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*Profoundly changing the way our community experiences aging,
serious illness and grief – one family at a time.*