

# Grief's Journey



As you continue working through your grief, we at HopeWest continue to think about you and how you are doing on your journey to recovery. We are interested in the emotional landscape of your journey, how you have learned to express your emotions and how you have learned to temper them.

The variety and intensity of the emotions and experiences associated with loss can be very difficult to manage. No matter how much we reassure you that your experiences and emotions are natural and necessary, and no matter how much we urge you to accept them, you must face the practical challenges of living with them.

The loss of a loved one can trigger a wide range of emotional responses that vary in duration and intensity. This newsletter contains suggestions for how to cope with three very difficult emotions: depression, guilt and anger. These suggestions are drawn from the experience of other bereaved people, from research and from our professional experience. We hope it will help.

## Depression – There is a Way Out

Usually, depression incorporates many feelings such as loss, emptiness, sadness and loneliness. It is normal that these feelings are a part of your grief journey. Someone you love has died and you hurt physically, emotionally and spiritually. Just like a physical wound, the pain from your grief needs attention. The only sure way to relieve it is to lean into it. Of course, this isn't easy; you want to retreat from pain and other people encourage you to be happy and to get control of yourself. Yet, now you need to listen to your sadness. By listening to your feelings within, you begin to heal your heart and soul.

It's natural to expect that the greatest impact of your pain and hurt will come immediately after the death. However, nature protects you so you generally won't feel the full impact of your loss for weeks or months. Time allows your body, mind and spirit to come together and embrace the depth of your loss, emptiness and sadness. You have every right to feel these feelings. By feeling them, you empower yourself to heal and to find continued meaning and purpose in life.

Depression is a natural response to loss but extended depression which immobilizes you can block recovery and new involvement with life. Severe and extended depression deserves professional help. Be aware of the symptoms of severe depression. For the most part they are intense and extend over a long period of time.

- **Loss of appetite**
- **Insomnia**
- **Inability to enjoy anything**
- **Anxious or restless behavior**
- **Apathy, preoccupation with thoughts of suicide or a desire to be dead**
- **Loss of interest in sex**
- **Prolonged difficulty concentrating or making decisions**
- **Prolonged memory problems and irritability**
- **Feelings of worthlessness**
- **Inability to cry when you need and wish to**
- **Intense guilt**
- **Withdrawal from friends and family**

The symptoms of depression are a part of normal grief and are not generally a cause for concern. You are the best judge. If your symptoms persist without relief for an extended period and they interfere severely with your day-to-day life, you may want to seek professional help. Seeking help is not a sign of weakness; it is a sign of your determination to heal.

A first step in coping with depression is accepting it. Sometimes feelings like grief and anger hide behind depression. It may help to explore the hidden sources of your depression, giving yourself permission to feel and express difficult emotions. Talking with a friend or counselor, reading books about personal experiences of grief and writing in a journal can help.

Recognize that depression can be part of the recovery process from loss and can serve a purpose. Depression comes during the natural period of disorganization that follows a major loss. The apathy of depression can allow you to release the past and eventually reorganize your thoughts, feelings and daily life in the present.

Be aware of the effect of your thoughts on your mood. Notice when your thoughts hurt and recognize that you can choose thoughts that feel good. You can think about things that give you pleasure and confidence. Notice pessimistic, discouraging or suspicious thoughts and practice replacing them with helpful, encouraging, patient, gentle or trusting thoughts.

Also be aware of the effect of your activities, body positions, and facial expressions on your mood. Give yourself permission to do things that give you pleasure and a sense of accomplishment. Add yoga, meditation or prayer to your daily life. Eliminate habits (such as alcohol) that exacerbate depression.

As you seek a way out of depression, continue to allow yourself the full range of grief emotions. Acknowledge them, express them and release them. The only negative emotion is one that is not acknowledged and expressed. Lean into your pain and reward yourself by leaning into pleasure.



***“There are no two flakes alike  
no two persons...  
Each being is unique unto itself,  
and has its own special qualities.”***

*– Mary Southard*



## **Moving Beyond Guilt**

During your grief journey, you will undoubtedly experience many different feelings. Guilt feelings and self-blame are almost inevitable when you have had a loss. Whatever your situation has been, it is common to place some blame on yourself. While these feelings may be genuine, they are often unrealistic. Like many people, you may be too harsh with yourself. In your imagination you believe that you are responsible for anticipating or preventing events which you cannot control. You may view your mistakes as negligent and feel guilty, as if you had intentionally brought harm to yourself or someone else. You may have even said or thought things like, “If only I could have gotten him to see the doctor sooner...” or, “If only I had insisted that he quit smoking,” or, “If only I had made her get another opinion.”

Other “if onlys” may be:

*“If only I hadn’t fought with him so much...”*

*“If only I had been home more...”*

*“If only I had been more loving...”*

It’s natural to think that you could or should have done things differently. However, you only cause yourself unnecessary pain with this kind of thinking. Everybody has some “if onlys.” When you accept that these feelings are normal, you won’t be so alarmed by them. Remember, be as compassionate with yourself as you would be with others.

If you are feeling guilty as part of your grief experience, it helps to acknowledge and express these feelings openly with a patient, compassionate and non-judgmental listener. It does not help to allow others to explain away the feelings. They are trying to help but their explanations will not allow you to talk out what you think and feel inside. When these feelings of guilt, self-blame and regret are explored, you can come to understand the limits of your own responsibility.

As you know, you can't please everyone all the time. As you move through life, you must make choices about the responsibilities you will accept and the ones that you can't fulfill. When you meet one person's needs, you can't avoid neglecting another's. Accept that you cannot be responsible for everyone and everything.

You may need weeks or months to process the "What if's" and how things might have been or how you could have acted differently. Eventually you will find forgiveness and see things from a different perspective. You won't need to blame yourself. The time will come when you can let go and move on.

## Handling Explosive Emotions

While grieving, you may experience a whole range of explosive emotions such as anger, hate, blame, terror, rage and jealousy. While these emotions may be volatile, they are a natural part of your grief journey. However, these emotions generally rest upon many other feelings like anguish, bitterness, helplessness, fear and hurt. It's important to give yourself permission to feel whatever you feel right now.

Unfortunately, our society doesn't understand that these emotions are normal. As a result, you may not have learned how to express your volatile emotions in a way that is healthy or acceptable to you or others. As an alternative, you may suppress these feelings, leaving yourself depressed and often physically ill. The vehemence of your emotions may frighten you and you may also feel guilty about having them.

Remember, your feelings are neither good nor bad, they simply are. It is best to acknowledge and express them, rather than judge them. This is the key to your healing journey; explosive emotions must be expressed, not suppressed. If your strong emotions have an appropriate outlet, eventually they will weaken.

Express them by talking about them with someone who will listen, by screaming them when you are alone, by writing them, or through some particular physical activity where you expend a lot of energy. Hit inanimate objects – be careful not to hurt yourself or another. Take regular walks which allows your body to release built-up toxins.

Regardless of your upbringing, your strong feelings can be diffused by finding safe and appropriate ways to vent and release volatile emotions. You will be able to look more deeply into yourself at what lies below the layers of rage or accusation. In time you will be able to let go and move on, no longer bound to the pain of your grief.

*“The main thing in life  
is not to be afraid  
to be human.”*

*– Pablo Casals*

## Parent's Corner

### *Dealing with Teens Who are Grieving*

Understand normal teen development issues and the grieving process so you don't make situations more complicated than necessary and so you are aware of danger signs.

Remember that intense feelings don't go on forever and won't destroy them. Teens often have not learned this yet and find it helpful to be reassured.

Listen without judging. Teens need support and need to feel heard. This may allow them to be more in touch with their softer feelings and to express them. This will help decrease their anger. Avoid judging. In their battle for independence, teens are sensitive to parental judgment and may be rebellious.

Be aware of your own needs and losses so you can avoid distorting your relationships with your teens. Otherwise, you can risk making teens into "mini adults" or parent figures by expecting too much of them or trying to keep them young. Expect and accept a dip in academic performance. Ease your expectations. For instance, be patient with your collegiate standards while your teen is more concerned with memories

of the past and coping day to day. Be there for the teen; give permission to take a lighter load and encourage your teens to see a school counselor if needed.

Respect their need for privacy. Teens need a place they can call their own. They see disrespect of their privacy as a major threat to their independence.

Understand how teens think more abstractly so you will be ready for any philosophical discussions. Avoid undue upset or harsh reactions to “weird” philosophies they may try to explore.

When you can, add perspective to the teen’s urgent discussions.

Give permission not to grieve all the time. Teens need to have good times with their friends and have respite from their grief.

Acknowledge that there are many good ways to grieve. These include different styles and different timing. You can avoid unnecessary trouble when differences are accepted.

Look for hopelessness or anger that is not dealt with constructively, impulsiveness, isolation, or a sense of helplessness. These are cues that counseling may be recommended. If the teen is acutely suicidal, call the Suicide Hotline (1-800-470-3339) or 911. If your concern is not life threatening, contact the school counselor or a bereavement counselor from HopeWest who specializes in counseling teens.

## Teens and Mourning

The teenage years are difficult for everyone in a teen’s life. A death in a teen’s life presents an especially serious challenge. If it is well met, it’s an opportunity for great growth; if not, there’s a possibility of a very troubled life. In the worst scenario, such a troubled life could lead to suicide or very destructive behavior affecting himself or others.

In normal development, teens have conflicting pressures. They are between childhood and adulthood, torn between peer and parental influence, striving for independence while secretly wanting others to take care of them. They are going through momentous body changes which impact their self-image and, in this self-conscious time of their life, often lead to a lowered self-esteem. The hormone changes which occur lead them on an emotional roller coaster ride.

The teen’s intense feelings threaten their sense of control which, in turn, threatens their sense of independence. They often do not understand that these feelings will pass and will not destroy them. They long for closeness with other people yet the closeness requires them to be vulnerable and childlike. It is difficult for them to accept vulnerability so they shun intimacy at the very same time they pursue it.

Teens, especially boys, are afraid of their softer feelings like sadness, fear and loneliness. They use anger to cover their vulnerability to these feelings and to feel more powerful. This sense of power is also a major coping strategy in their defense against death anxiety.

The normal development of independence in teens includes evaluating their parents and other adults. They no longer see their parents as perfect. Their disappointment may be intense. Parents need to accept their sense of disappointment, so their teens don’t become frustrated in their drive for independence and become rebellious.

Teens are more adult-like in their cognitive development than children. Children ask concrete questions about death: “What happens when we die?” Teens think about the meaning of life abstractly; “What is real?” and “What’s it all about?” Because of their abstract view of life, their volatile emotions and their impulsiveness, teens are more accident-prone and at a greater risk for suicide.

For all children, grief can make concentration difficult and their school grades typically drop. Teens, though, are preparing for college or the work place. A dip in grades provokes anxiety for the student and parents and is a concern for the teachers.

## Teens and Feelings

Below are ten important facts about feelings for teens:

1. Unpleasant feelings add to the quality and meaning of our lives.
2. Unpleasant feelings bring us information.
3. Unpleasant feelings often want a response from us; recognition, respect, and some action to lessen their intensity.
4. Feelings are changing rather than permanent. Pleasant and unpleasant emotions come and go.
5. There is an up-and-down cycle to feelings. When we are at the bottom, our challenge is to remember that we will cycle up again.

6. We cannot usually get rid of our unpleasant feelings instantly. We can, however, take some simple actions to help ourselves through the pain.
7. Feelings – especially unpleasant feelings – seek expression and release.
8. We are responsible for our feelings and for how we choose to express them.
9. How we think about an event or about what happens to us determines how we feel.
10. We may need to seek professional counseling for help with our painful emotions.

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## Reading Recommendations for Children

– Under Age 7 –

***A Funeral for Whiskers*** by Dr. Lawrence Balter

Sandy is sad and confused after her cat Whiskers dies. She is helped by her parents and a funeral for Whiskers. A helpful essay for parents on children's grief is at the end of the book.

***Double Dip Feelings*** by Barbara S. Cain

Discusses how sometimes we feel opposite feelings at the same time. Gives good examples from everyday life. Not directly related to loss but useful in helping children understand their feelings.

***Everett Anderson Goodbye*** by Lucille Clifton

Young African-American boy has a hard time with different feelings after his father dies.

***Lifetimes: A Beautiful Way to Explain Death to Children*** by Bryan Mellonie & Robert Inghen

Beautiful illustrations of nature with simple writings about beginnings and endings of plants, animals and people.

***Nana Upstairs & Nana Downstairs*** by Tomie de Paola

To be read to young school age children. A touching story about the love of a boy, his grandmother and great-grandmother and how he copes with their deaths.

***The Dead Bird*** by Margaret Wise Brown

Some young children discover a bird that has just died. They observe what “dead” looks like in an animal. They bury it with care and have a funeral for it.

***The Two of Them*** by Alike

A simply written and colorfully illustrated story of the tender relationship between a grandfather and his granddaughter. The little girl is left with many good memories after her grandfather dies.

– Age 7 and Up –

***Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*** by Judith Viorst

A classic story – a comfort to anyone who has ever had a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. It helps to know others have bad days, too.

***Annie and the Old One*** by Miska Miles

A beautifully written Newberry Honor book about a young Navajo girl dealing with the approach of her grandmother's death.

***Badger's Parting Gifts*** by Susan Varley

Old Badger was a good friend and teaches to the woodland creatures and they are overwhelmed when he dies. Then each remembers what Badger has taught them. A good story about old age and the importance of memories.

***Gran Gran's Best Trick*** by L. Dwight Holden, M.D.

A young girl tells about her special relationship with her grandfather and the difficulty of dealing with his death from cancer.

***Geranium Morning*** by E. Sandy Powell

Two friends whose parents die, one suddenly in a car accident and one from illness, learn to deal with their grief. The book includes feeling different and having problems at school, as well as changes in the family after a death and dealing with guilt.

***My Feelings Are Like Wild Animals*** by Gary Egeberg

This is a practical guide to help teens (and former teens) feel and deal with painful emotions. This is made in work-book format and is appealing with lots of helpful information and activities.

## Grief's Journey

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serious illness and grief – one family at a time.*