

DON'T BE SURPRISED WHEN...

TIPS FOR YOUNG ADULTS GRIEVING A DEATH



The Dougy Center
The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

DON'T BE SURPRISED WHEN...

Grief comes with a huge range of emotions

Grief gets stereotyped as sadness or depression and people can get caught off guard when they feel anger, relief, anxiety, numbness, fear, irritation, resentment, restlessness, impatience, etc. The list is long. All of these emotions are normal. If you never cry or get angry, it doesn't mean there's something wrong with you. What we think, feel, do, and say after someone dies can be influenced and affected by everything that makes up who we are, including gender, culture, ethnicity, religious/spiritual beliefs, sexuality, economic status, where we were raised, where we currently live, and family traditions. *"Those stages of grief? Totally not helpful or true."*

TIP It can be helpful to make room for whatever emotion comes up, without judging it as bad or a sign that you're not doing grief "right," because there is no right or wrong way to grieve.

Grief turns out to be so much more than just emotions

Your body, brain, mind, and spirit all come along for the grief ride. This could look like exhaustion, feeling amped up, difficulty sleeping, anxiety, and feeling run down with colds, coughs or headaches. You might find that you can't remember anything (Um, why did I walk in this room?) and it can be really hard to concentrate. Many people find it's tough to eat, either because their stomach feels tied in knots or because nothing tastes good or right. *"I wish I had known how exhausting grief was. Sleeping, tuning-out, getting away, nothing worked for me. My body/mind was in recovery mode. Don't forget to nourish your body."*

TIP Try to take good care of your physical body. Eat when and what you can, stay hydrated, rest when you're able, and move your body in ways that feel supportive.

We are guessing you're here because someone in your life has died.

Whether it was a parent, sibling, partner/spouse, grandparent, close friend, or other family member, we're glad you found your way to this tip sheet.

This information comes directly from the grieving young adults we've worked with in our peer support groups. Even though grief is different for everyone, it can be helpful to hear what it's been like for others who "get it" on some level. We compiled a list of the parts of grief that can be surprising, especially if you've never had someone close to you die. The list is far from complete, and there are likely 101 other elements that could come up for you.

It's hard to do things you used to be able to do

Grief takes a lot of mental, emotional, and physical energy. Daily tasks such as grocery shopping, paying bills, taking care of pets and children, cooking, and responding to texts, emails, or phone calls can feel overwhelming. *"Life responsibilities felt like totally monumental tasks."*

TIP Ask for help when you can, let people know you might not get back to them, and do what you can, when you can.

There's no syllabus, how-to manual, or timeline for grief.

One of the most shocking aspects can be the reality that there's no expected course or definable endpoint for grief. It's as individual and unique as the relationship you had with the person who died. You may find yourself struggling with the thought, "How can I still be grieving when it's been (x # of days, months, years)?" Sometimes it will be your own protest, coming from a wish to feel differently than you do. Other times this expectation will come from others, "Aren't you over it by now? It's been..." Grief isn't something you have to finish or move past. *"I wish I had known that some days it will feel like the pain will never end. Then there will be other days where I feel like smiling. I have learned to just embrace the good days and accept the bad days. This grief is something I will have to live with for the rest of my life, it won't be so hard, but there will still be the occasional days where I feel like I can't breathe from the pain."*

TIP Grief will change over time and you'll begin to integrate the loss into your life, but you don't have to "get over it."

You don't recognize yourself

Grief can change everything, including how you feel, think, act, and what you value. For some this can be a clarifying process, bringing priorities into clear focus. *"I remember the desperate feeling of wanting to change jobs, friends, location... ANYTHING to distract myself from the pain, only later to find that a familiar routine allowed me to store energy reserves."*

TIP Whether you make big life changes or not, grief is likely to shift, at least temporarily, how you feel and act in the world. Try to give yourself permission to change or to keep things just as they are for awhile.

Grief shows up when and where it wants

Grief comes in waves, and sometimes those waves roll in when you least expect them. Maybe it's walking past the person's favorite food in the grocery store, hearing a song on the radio, a celebratory event, or a random reminder that leaves you overwhelmed with emotion. *"Pay attention to your emotions and recognize that things that never bothered you before may now be activators for your grief. It's ok to step away from those things for a while until your emotions readjust."*

TIP Trust that there's nothing wrong with you, even if you find yourself suddenly crying in the produce aisle or hiding out in the bathroom at weddings or parties.

Everyone is suddenly a grief expert

Be prepared for a barrage of unsolicited advice — even from complete strangers. Grief is a universal experience, so pretty much anyone you run into has a story about what they did or didn't do and how you should or shouldn't do it too. Sometimes this leads to true understanding, other (most) times it means suggestions, comments, or platitudes that you didn't ask for and can feel hurtful. *"People will say things that seem inappropriate, jarring, callous, self-serving, or just out of place. It's the fault of not knowing what to say and blurting out the first thing that comes to them. They are most likely not *trying* to upset you."*

TIP In the midst of these well-meaning but unwanted words, try to hear your own truth. It can be hard to pull apart what is real for you and what is pressure, direct or subtle, from other people. This pressure can also come from within, based on what you've been taught or told is true about grief from books, movies, and other people. Take time to sit with what feels right to you and perhaps come up with a standard, "Thanks, but really, no thanks!" response when people try to give you advice.

Some people are there for you and others fade away

Grief has a way of bringing relationships into the spotlight. Sometimes the people who can and can't show up to support you might be surprising. *"I was shocked to find that lifelong friends didn't offer the same level of support as people I just met who were facing similar losses. It was hard for me to understand why I couldn't connect to people I had always been close to. I was also surprised to find genuine deep connections with new people who understood what it feels like to have lost someone important to them."*



You might find yourself deepening friendships with some people and setting clear boundaries with others. Because grief can be pretty isolating and lonely, it's helpful to find people who feel safe, accepting, and supportive. If friends and family aren't able to be there for you, look for a support group in your community or [online](https://dougycare.org/grief-support-programs) at dougycare.org/grief-support-programs.

You grieve more than just the person

You might grieve the person you were before the death or the way your life used to be. You might also grieve how the death is changing relationships with friends, family, and partners. Many people miss being able to predict how they will respond to certain situations such as work, meet ups with a friend, or holidays. You may grieve events in the future that will be different without the person: graduations, wedding, having children, buying a house, career achievements, etc. *"I found that of all the things I missed besides my mother, I missed my innocence the most. I realized there were so many things I no longer could relate to with people my age. College and jobs and the common complaints weren't things I cared about."*



Remind yourself that grieving these other aspects is as valid and normal as grieving the person and who they were in your life.

Guilt and regret show up

We'd venture a guess that 99.9% of people grieving feel guilt or regret about something they did and said or didn't do or say. We aren't expected to be completely perfect in our relationships because we are human and we all say and do things that looking back we wish we hadn't. When someone dies, this very natural experience can feel extra intense because we can't apologize to the person — in person — or go back and change things. *"I felt so guilty for not spending more time with my brother. The doctors said he would survive his illness, but they were wrong. I realize I couldn't have known it was going to happen, but sometimes I still wish I could have. I would have taken a leave from work to be with him."*



It can help to acknowledge these feelings, without rushing to push them aside. Sometimes just sitting with guilt and regret can lessen their intensity. You can also try one of the suggestions in the 8 Self-Care Tips as a way to transform these emotions. If verbalizing these feelings of guilt and regret helps, reach out to a friend, family member, colleague, therapist or other trusted person who will listen without a dismissive "don't feel that way" or "you know that's not right" comment.

You need a lot of self-care

And we don't just mean hot baths, although those are great too. What you did for self-care in the past may or may not work as well when you're grieving. Be open to new ways of sustaining and nourishing your body, mind, and being. *"When I am feeling really overwhelmed by my grief, I try to go to the movies. Just to be so focused on another world for even a couple hours gives my body and mind a tiny break from my intense emotions."*



Try to find out what the movie is about before going to be prepared for any unexpected grief story lines!



EIGHT SELF-CARE IDEAS FOR WHEN THE GRIEF GETS OVERWHELMING OR CATCHES YOU OFF GUARD

1. Breathe. When we get tense we tend to hold our breath or have short, shallow breaths. First, just notice that you are breathing and then try slowing it down, breathing more into your belly, and exhaling a little longer than you inhale.

2. Move your body. This doesn't have to be a sport (but it can be) — take a walk, do a push up, dance, or try cleaning (strange, but it can help).

3. Express yourself. Write, draw, organize, listen to/play music, or anything else that lets you express yourself without having to talk to someone.

4. Make room for whatever feelings are coming up. If you try to push them away, they'll likely push back harder. Feelings change and they won't last forever. If the feelings come up at a time when you really can't give them space, like a work meeting, remind yourself to check back in with them when you can.

5. Be kind — to yourself. Grievers tend to give themselves a really hard time for not doing grief right — whatever that "right" might be. Remind yourself you're doing the best you can in the moment and that it's okay you're having a hard time.

6. Be a good friend — to yourself. Experiment with telling yourself you can do this, even if you don't know what you're doing. You might be feeling emotions you've never had before or doing things in life for the first time and all of it is happening without the person who died. Take a moment to acknowledge how new and different this is and tell yourself, "Even if I'm overwhelmed right now, I will figure this out." And then...

7. Ask for help. We know, this one can be really hard and scary to do. Keep it simple and remember that people usually want to help, they are just waiting to be asked.

8. Take time to celebrate whatever is going well. When you're grieving it can be hard to make space for feeling good. You might feel guilty if you find yourself laughing or having a good time. Taking a break from grief doesn't mean you love or miss the person any less.

OTHER GRIEF SURPRISES

"The lead up to significant days like anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays was harder than the actual day."

"Finding a community like a support group was so helpful!"

"I was scared to make new connections because I was worried everyone would die."

"Everyone around me changed as much as I did — it was disorienting."

"It was easier to talk to strangers than my close friends."

"I felt guilty the first time I laughed and had a good time after my mom died."

"My need for hugs increased dramatically — I was glad I had a dog to snuggle with whenever I needed the comfort."

"I found myself spontaneously talking to my dad — at first I worried that something was wrong with me, but realized it's pretty common."

"How dehydrating grief can be — drink more water!"

IF YOU NEED ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

One last (but important) thing. Grief can be really hard — and it can make other things that were already hard seem impossible. Sometimes, people need more help than friends and family can provide. If you are struggling with work, school, eating, sleeping, or if you're thinking about hurting yourself or others, ask for help. Whether it's a support group, counseling, or contacting a crisis line by calling 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or texting HELLO to 741741, please do reach out to someone when you're struggling — you matter, and you deserve help and support.