



What You Should Know

If a loved one has died, you may feel as though your entire world has turned upside down. You will need a period of adjustment before you feel better. The amount of time it will take for you to grieve will depend on the circumstances of the death, the nature of the relationship, and your own personal needs. While grief is not the same for everyone, there are a number of similarities among people grieving after a disaster:

- In the beginning, you may spend a lot of time thinking about the person who died, longing and, perhaps, searching for him/her.
- You are likely to experience strong feelings of sadness and loneliness, fear and anxiety, and even resentment and anger. You may avoid thinking about your loss, while at other times you may make special efforts to remember or include the loved one in your life.
- As you start to go on with your life without the friend or family member, you will typically feel the intensity of grief subsiding. You will start to accept the death, take comfort in positive memories, and even feel that you can maintain a sense of connection to the person who died. You may, however, have a return of brief periods of sadness, even as the intense grief subsides.
- As you start to re-engage in activities and relationships, you may experience guilt over doing so, as if you have betrayed the person who died. This guilt is a common part of the grieving process that typically will lessen as you continue to cope with the death.

Some ways of thinking can keep you trapped in grief, particularly when the death is sudden or unexpected. Common signs of this **complicated grief** are:

- Trouble accepting the death
- Inability to trust others
- Numbness and detachment
- Excessive agitation, bitterness, or anger
- Feeling very uneasy about moving on with life
- Feeling that life is empty or meaningless
- Believing the future will be bleak

What Can Help

- **Seek social support.** Talk to someone you trust about your loss. Make a list of a few caring family members, friends, or others to whom you can talk. Start to reach out to them.
- **Seek religious or spiritual help.** You may find that this can help you gain a broader view, have a sense that you and your loved ones are looked after, and feel connected to a greater power.
- **Find a way to honor the deceased.** Writing or creating a ritual can help you feel connected to the person, give his/her life continuing meaning, and allow you to live in a way that honors and reaffirms your relationship, instead of cutting ties, “getting over it,” and moving on with your life.
- **Take care of yourself.** Do relaxation exercises, find good ways to distract yourself, practice good sleep habits, and plan fun or meaningful activities. Try not to feel guilty about taking temporary breaks from thinking about or remembering your loved one. Taking care of yourself will rebuild your strength and allow you to continue to remember and honor him/her.

- **Practice helpful thinking.** Even though you do not have control over the death, changing your thoughts about it can help you feel better. Use the table below for ideas of helpful thoughts you can focus on, then practice concentrating on them whenever unhelpful thoughts arise.

Unhelpful Thoughts	Makes You Feel	Helpful Thoughts	Makes You Feel
"I should have been able to save her. It's my fault." "Why did I survive, while he didn't?"	Guilty	"If I had done things differently, it might not have made a difference." "That choice belongs to a higher power."	Realistic Accepting Understanding
"There's no one who can help me bear my pain. It will never stop." "My pain will never end. There is nothing I can do to stop it." "I will lose people that I get close to."	Hopeless Powerless Fearful	"If I talk to someone about my grief, it might help me feel better." "I can get help. Some people will understand." "The odds of my losing all the people I get close to are pretty slim. I still have people in my life just like before."	Accepting Hopeful

- **Seek additional counseling.** Counseling can give you the ongoing support and guidance to learn to correct unhelpful thoughts and beliefs, find positive coping strategies, and gain meaning from and a wider view of the death. Counseling can help you find ways to honor and maintain positive memories of the deceased, work towards accepting the death, manage emotions like anger or avoidance, resume normal day-to-day life, and look forward to a better future.