



MY GRIEF COMPASS

Navigating The Journey Of Grief

Introduction

The experience of losing a loved one is difficult. While there are some aspects that are universal, it can herald a period of drastic changes to daily routines and ways of life. However, as we learn to cope and make the necessary adjustments, grief and loss can become more manageable and life becomes more liveable over time.

It is our hope that this bereavement toolkit could serve you as relevant information and point you to useful resources as you navigate grief. The information does not need to be read from page to page, you could focus on topics that are useful for your journey and help you to understand what you are going through to cope better. Besides accessing information on grief and strategies to care for yourself after a loss, we invite you to attempt some of the remembrance activities included in these pages that may bring you further comfort and insight.

Please feel free to contact our Bereavement Care Team if you have any questions, or need further assistance.

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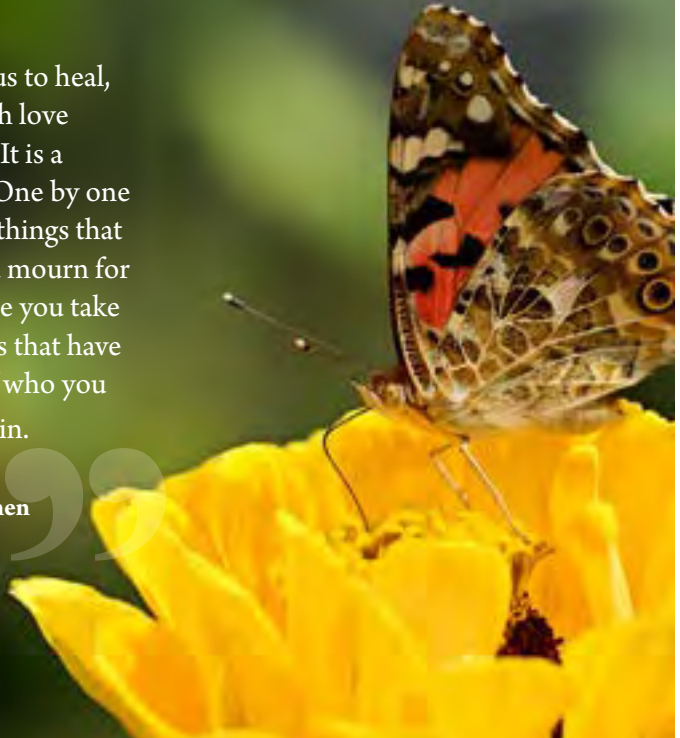
Understanding Grief

WHAT AM I GOING THROUGH NOW?

Death and grief affect us in a variety of ways. Though there are five domains (physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and spiritual) of grief reactions, not all of us would experience all of them. Grief is a personal experience and we have our own ways of coping with the loss of a loved one.

Grieving allows us to heal, to remember with love rather than pain. It is a sorting process. One by one you let go of the things that are gone and you mourn for them. One by one you take hold of the things that have become a part of who you are and build again.

Rachel Naomi Remen



How we respond to grief depends on several factors, including our personality, depth of relationship with our loved one and the social support we receive, among others. Let us be patient and pace ourselves whether we are dealing with our own grief or holding space for the grief of another.



What is grief?

Grief is a natural reaction to a loss we experience. It is an intense feeling and some may find it hard to express through words. It is not a pathological condition or an illness. We do not have to fix grief. It takes time and support from people around us to adjust to a loss.

What is loss?

Loss is the process of losing someone or something of significance. The depth of the loss is related directly to the meaning or value placed on the item or person. Death is the event most often thought of as a loss, but there are other ways a loss can take place.



What is bereavement?

It is the period following the loss of a loved one to death, characterised by a state of grief and mourning.

Can grief start before a loss occurs?

Yes, grief prior to a loss is known as anticipatory grief. It is the set of feelings and reactions that occur when one knows that a loss is about to happen. These emotions could be just as intense as the grief felt after a death. Anticipatory grief is a normal reaction that occurs in the context of a terminal illness. It may help us to start preparing for the loss and learn ways to cope.



HOW DO I KNOW I AM GRIEVING?

Do people all grieve the same way?

Everyone's grief is unique even though some may experience similar grief reactions. The following factors contribute to the impact of grief and way of coping:

- How the loss occurs
- Our relationship with the person we lost
- The personality of the bereaved
- Experiences with previous losses
- Current life stage when the loss takes place
- Presence of concurrent stressors
- Availability of a supportive family / social network

What are the common grief reactions?

Common grief reactions include those summarized below (Worden, 2018). All reactions are considered normal unless they persist over a prolonged period. One might experience several or many of the reactions, with some being more observable than others. Even with reactions that are not immediately observable, grief is often present.

COMMON GRIEF REACTIONS

SPIRITUAL

- Doubts and questions on religious or spiritual beliefs / God
- Feeling that one has lost direction in life
- Searching for meaning in the loss
- Change or shift in original religious beliefs

PHYSICAL

- Hollowness in the stomach
- Tightness in the chest
- Oversensitivity to noise, smell, images
- Feeling disconnected / detached from one's body and thoughts
- Breathlessness, feeling short of breath
- Muscle weakness
- Lack of energy
- Dry mouth

BEHAVIOURAL

- Trouble falling asleep or having disrupted sleep
- Changes in appetite
- Absent-mindedness
- Withdrawal from others; feeling less interested in the world or life's activities
- Dreaming of the deceased
- Avoiding reminders of the deceased
- Searching for, and calling out the name of, the deceased
- Sighing and / or crying
- Being restless or overactive
- Visiting places or carrying significant objects that remind one of the deceased
- Treasuring objects that belonged to the deceased

COGNITIVE

- Disbelief, thinking the loss did not happen
- Confused thinking, difficulty concentrating
- Preoccupation, obsessive thoughts about the deceased or what was lost
- Sensing the presence of the deceased, thinking that the deceased is still there
- Hallucinations, seeing and / or hearing the deceased
- Thoughts of self-blame
- Thoughts of injustice and / or unfairness

EMOTIONAL

- Deep sadness
- Anger
- Guilt and / or regret
- Anxiety
- Loneliness
- Fatigue
- Helplessness
- Shock
- Yearning for the person (thinking "if only" this had not happened.)
- Emancipation or sense of freedom (Not all feelings are negative. Sometimes there is a sense of being released, perhaps from caregiving burden, when a loss occurs.)
- Relief (may be felt after someone dies from a lengthy or painful illness or if one's relationship with the deceased was difficult.)
- Numbness – a lack of feeling (Numbness may protect one from a flood of feelings all occurring at the same time.)

What type(s) of grief am I experiencing?

Anyone who has loved knows that we have to go through the grieving process at some point. Yet there may be a lack in understanding of the types of grief that one could experience. This could result in anxiety. Understanding the differences allows us to navigate the grief process in a meaningful and healthy way. The following provides general information on the types of grief. You may wish to consult your counsellor or medical social worker to find out more.

WHAT TYPES(S) OF GRIEF AM I EXPERIENCING?



NORMAL GRIEF

Grief that is normative is displayed through common reactions to a loss; in the physical, psychological and / or behavioral domains. The distress could be intense, but one still has the capacity to continue engaging in basic daily activities and make adjustments that support living a life after loss. The distress is gradually alleviated over time.

DELAYED GRIEF

When grief is delayed, one does not experience fully the common grief reactions long after the loss occurs. One could be consciously or unconsciously avoiding the reality and pain of the loss and suppressing the reactions of grief. Delayed grief could occur in the context of denial or even shock when death had been sudden.



DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

Disenfranchised loss occurs when the loss cannot be socially sanctioned, openly acknowledged or publicly mourned as the relationship with one's loved one is not socially accepted by others or the loss is deemed as unimportant. It may occur in situations where one is not expected to grieve as much for the person in the eyes of one's family, culture or community.



PROLONGED GRIEF

People with prolonged grief are observed to have intense grief reactions which stay elevated for a long period of time (one year and beyond) with little or no improvement. Besides feeling more depressed and having increased anxiety, people experiencing prolonged grief may feel incapacitated and have their daily functions impaired on a long-term basis. Much time is spent on contemplating the loss, longing for reunion and being unable to adjust to life without the deceased.

AMBIGUOUS GRIEF

Ambiguous grief is sometimes referred to as unresolved grief. It typically develops in contexts where the loss occurs with a lack of information, understanding and closure, for instance, where a loved one is physically present but psychologically unavailable. For example, he or she has dementia or has suffered the loss of mental capacity, is battling a chronic mental illness, has not recovered from a traumatic brain injury or struggles with drug and / or alcohol addiction. In situations where a loved one is physically missing but psychologically present, for example, given away for adoption, lost through miscarriage or stillborn birth, ambiguous loss may also be experienced.



ANTICIPATORY GRIEF

Anticipatory grief is common if losing a significant loved one to death is expected in the near term, even though he or she may still be around. There is grief for what might be changed in one's life in the coming days, weeks or months. During anticipatory grief, one might envision a life without their loved one and focus on possible response or mourning once death occurs. As such, some people experiencing anticipatory grief could feel sad, helpless, fearful, angry and / or hopeless.

THE PRESENCE OF GRIEF

How long does grief last?

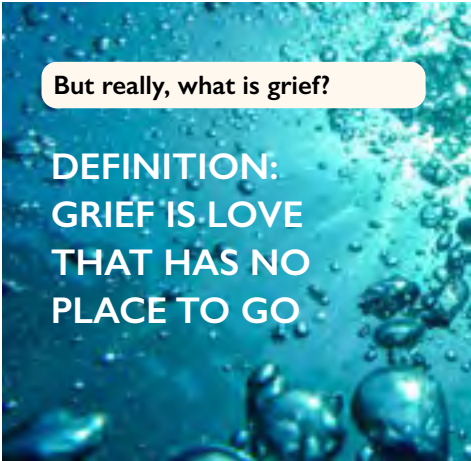
The question of how long grief lasts varies for individuals in view of the unique factors that affect one's grief experience, so there is no specific timeline for grief. After the loss of a loved one, one would have to face a new world, in particular; to cope with new experiences and make adjustments during the first year after bereavement. Some people may find the second year more challenging, as the loss becomes more real to them. It is helpful to be gentle with yourself, pace yourself and allow as much time as you need to adjust.

Does the grief process have a “pattern”?

Grief tends to come in waves and it might not be experienced in a continuous manner. At times you may feel sad and heartbroken, but in between these moments, you can still experience emotions that may accompany other events that are taking place in your life, including relief, joy and even peace. Sadness and sorrow can co-exist with other emotions. The Dual-process Model explores the vacillation between loss-orientation and restoration-orientation, how sometimes we experience yearning for our loved one and contemplate our loss and how at other times, we find ourselves having capacity to attend to activities that life requires of us. This vacillation between grief and life is healthy.

Usually, grief reactions start to fade between three to six months, but it may not apply to everyone. Over time, when grief is less intense, we may learn to live our life fully despite the loss. Grief reactions could still be felt from time to

time, even after many years. This is very common. It might be triggered by many things such as anniversaries, other special dates or events in life, songs and so on and we can make plans to be prepared for them.



But really, what is grief?

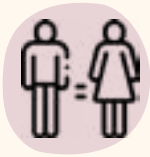
DEFINITION:
GRIEF IS LOVE
THAT HAS NO
PLACE TO GO

WHAT DO GRIEVERS SAY?

“ I stop paying as much
attention to my grief
when it visits me again...
But I am aware of it...I embrace it
as part of my life.”

WHAT HAVE I MISUNDERSTOOD ABOUT GRIEF?

Here are some things about grief that we might have misunderstood:



GENDER DIFFERENCE

Myth: Women grieve more than man.

Reality: Everyone grieves differently. Grieving and its intensity are generally not dependent on gender although men and women may express and cope with grief differently.

TEARS

Myth: If I am not crying, I am not really grieving.

Reality: Some people cry frequently in grief but others may feel numb and are unable to cry. Some people experience swings between. Crying is not the only expression of grief. Not crying does not mean a person is not grieving. Let us remember that there are a myriad of ways grief could be expressed.



REACHING OUT

Myth: I should not bring anyone down by bothering them with my pain.

Reality: Identifying a few trusted people you can reach out to with your loss can become a lifeline for you and bring relief. People who care for you could feel more assured if you share your pain and thoughts with them. Loved ones around us sometimes find an avenue of coping, and even do something for the deceased by supporting another grieving family member.

There is sacredness in
tears. They are not a mark
of weakness, but of power.
They speak more eloquently
than ten thousand tongues.
They are the messages of
overwhelming grief, of deep
contrition and of
unspeakable love.

Washington Irving



TALKING ABOUT GRIEF

Myth: It is better not to talk or think about the pain as it only makes me feel worse.

Reality: Talking about or processing the loss loosens the grip of the pain. We are able to speak what is on our heart, grieve the loss and develop new insights besides accepting support and encouragement.



IMPACT

Myth: Grief is a terrible emotion.

Reality: Grief is not an emotion per se; grief can set us on a path of healing that allows intense feelings to be experienced, accepted, expressed and processed. Eventually, we work towards making meaning of the loss.

TIME

Myth: Grief gets better over time.

Reality: Grief does not follow a set timeline. There are good days and challenging days. Grief may cycle back and forth but grief reactions generally wane over time, especially if there are opportunities for grief to be processed.



LIFE AFTER LOSS

Myth: If I begin really living again, I am dishonouring my loved one.

Reality: There is no need to feel guilty about making space for life after bereavement. The rhythm of life often moves us along and we need to be present to take up roles and responsibilities and participate in the activities of life. Our life can grow around the loss. Learning to live again may follow some meaning-making to honour those who have gone ahead of us and perhaps reciprocate their love and desire of wholeness for us.



WHAT DO GRIEVERS SAY?

“Sometimes, I just don’t understand why I grieve so badly.”

**WE DO NOT
MOVE ON AFTER A LOSS.
WE MOVE FORWARD.**

Moving on implies cutting off and leaving the past behind. Moving forward allows us to remember our past, give thanks for it, integrate it into our present and rebuild our future upon it.



LIVING WITH GRIEF

How can I get over my grief?

We do not necessarily “get over grief” but learn to hold it, contain it, stay with it, manage it, and get through it. The intensity of grief reactions will eventually ease with time yet grieving the loss of a loved one may last a lifetime. We can do the following to move through grief:

WHAT DO GRIEVERS SAY?

“I can feel it in my chest and stomach... It’s like a big dark halo in me. Sometimes it grows bigger and bigger, and swallows me up.”



CONTINUE TO REMEMBER OUR LOVED ONE AFTER WE HEAL :

even though our loved one is physically not here with us, we can continue to cherish him or her in our heart and say their name



BUILD CONTINUING BONDS WITH YOUR LOVED ONE EVEN AS YOU PLAN FOR YOUR FUTURE



INTEGRATE GRIEF INTO OUR LIVES AND BUILD AGAIN



GROW AND ADAPT



Grieving is a process and one day, we might recall our loved one with love, rather than with pain. We can move forward in our grief.

What is the right way to grieve?

There is no right or wrong way to grieve, everyone grieves differently. Acknowledging your grief is often a good way to start. Ignoring grief can result in long-term, lasting, negative impact on one's life. Learn to listen to your needs, be patient with yourself and give yourself time for the healing process to take place gradually.

How can I cope with grief and bereavement?

Facing the death and loss of a loved one is hard. When death touches us, it affects us in profound and sometimes unexpected ways. A wide range of emotions and thoughts may be evoked, even in situations where death was expected. The way we grieve and cope with loss depends on a range of personal and situational factors, and no two persons will react in the same manner.



Most bereaved individuals will be able to cope with grief and make the necessary adjustments. Nevertheless, it is good to learn more about your grief and, if necessary, seek help to adjust to a new reality without your loved one, even if it does not seem possible right now.

What should I do if I do not feel better over time?

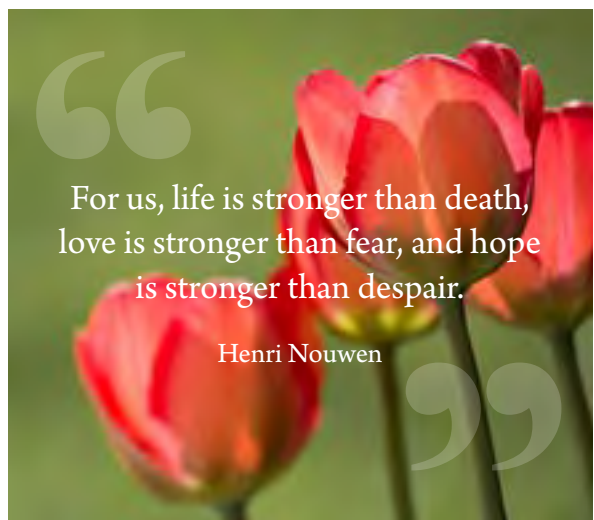
Imagine acute grief as a deep and fresh wound. You feel intense pain which alerts you to the presence of the wound. That is perhaps the start of your body's healing process. Without the pain, you might ignore the wound and it worsens.

As time passes, the wound slowly heals, and turns into a scar. The deep wound has closed, but the scar will always be there, sometimes raw to the touch. This parallels how love is forever and grief could be re-activated again by places, objects and even words that remind us of our loved one.

Usually, grief reactions start to fade around six months after loss. Most people move through their grief, adjust to the loss, and resume a changed but full life. Some, however, do not feel better and may start to have trouble functioning in their daily lives. The wounds have failed to heal and continue to cause immense pain. Grief becomes a concern when there are clear warning signs of inability to cope or maladaptive coping, for example:

- Prolonged and marked difficulties in managing daily routines and functioning;
- Extreme focus on the loss;
- Excessive feelings of sorrow, anger, resentment or guilt;
- Neglect of personal care, hygiene and grooming;
- Substance abuse – turning to alcohol or drugs;
- Experience of hallucinations;
- Persistent thoughts and feelings of being worthless and hopeless;
- Inability to find joy, positive feelings or meaning in life;
- Prolonged withdrawal from social activities and engagements; and
- Having thoughts of suicide or self-harm.

At this point, professional help may be required. Please seek professional help or speak to your doctor if you find yourself struggling to manage the impact of the grief. If you are having thoughts of suicide, seek help straightaway. It is important to have a trained professional to journey with you through this challenging period.



Losing A Spouse Or Partner

Spousal loss has been deemed as one of the most stressful of all life events. When one loses a spouse or a partner, one's world changes and the bereaved may experience unique secondary losses, including the loss of companionship, loss of financial stability, identity shifts, loss of support and help and loss of routines that render meaning and structure to one's life. Yet losing a spouse or partner need not be universally distressing if one is able to make suitable adjustments to integrate into a post-loss life.

What are some of the common grief reactions after the loss of a spouse or partner?

After losing one's life partner, the bereaved can feel a myriad of emotions, from grief and sorrow to shock. You may also feel survivor guilt for being alive or regret that you did not treat your spouse or partner better. You may even feel angry that he or she had left you and you are all alone, having to face an uncertain future without a helpmate. People with young children may feel anxious and inadequate about bringing up the children independently and grieve on behalf of them for losing a parent. There may be thoughts of wanting to join the deceased. All these feelings are normal. Over time, you would notice they decrease in intensity as you process them and take steps to address the practical concerns.



What are the possible risk factors or challenges?

Four factors can pose challenges to those facing grief of losing a spouse or partner, including the nature of the death and caregiving, quality of relationship, social support, and the co-occurrence of acute stressors.



Unexpected deaths tend to be more distressing than anticipated ones, possibly because sudden deaths could result in unresolved emotional, practical, and financial issues. The bereaved could experience distress as they missed the chance to say goodbye. On the other hand, for older couples, anticipated deaths could also take a toll on the surviving spouse or partner if he or she had been involved in long term caregiving and images of a loved one's suffering before death persist.



People in loving marriages with **high levels of warmth, dependence and low levels of conflict** may experience elevated grief in the first 6 months after loss. However, this strong relationship may also allow the bereaved spouse or partner to draw strength through continuing bonds and be a protective factor in the long run.



Social isolation can result in loneliness and hinder adjustments towards independent living if support or resources for doing so become unavailable because of limited contact with others during the grief journey.



Widowhood may come with **stressors** that increase anxiety, for example, concerns about financial difficulties or feeling helpless when household items break down if their spouse or partner was the one who worked, managed the finances and steered the household. Widowers may experience worsening of health conditions or increase in possible risk-taking behaviours because their spouse or partner is no longer around to monitor their health and encourage them to give up unhealthy habits and / or behaviours.

What can help me to adjust better after losing a spouse?

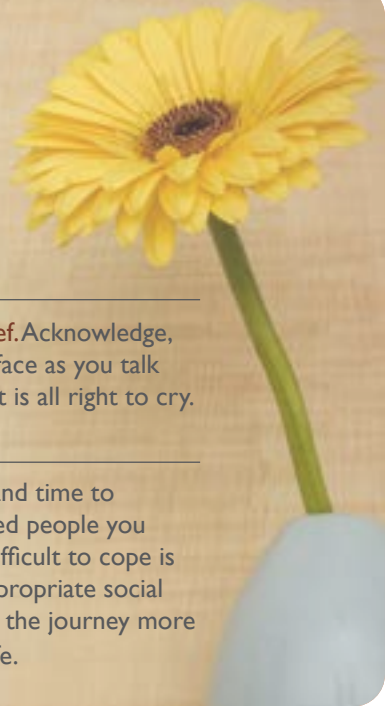
Many find it difficult to accept the loss of a spouse or partner. Some try not to talk about their grief to escape being overwhelmed by the sense of finality of the loss. However, it is important to strike a balance between confronting and avoiding the loss.

WHAT HELPS AFTER SPOUSAL LOSS

Telling the story of our loss and talking about our loved one help, whether it is through journaling, photo reviews, expressive modes, for example, drawing, crafts, or a conversation with a trusted friend or family member. They allow us to gradually come to terms with the reality of the loss.

Allow yourself to experience the feelings of grief. Acknowledge, identify and express the emotions that may surface as you talk about your loss or your loved one. Know that it is all right to cry. Tears bring us comfort and relief.

While some find it helpful to have quiet space and time to contemplate, grieve and rest, having a few trusted people you can call or spend time with should it become difficult to cope is important too. **Do not isolate yourself.** With appropriate social support, one does not feel so alone. This makes the journey more bearable and safe as you adjust to a post-loss life.



Other helpful ways to cope after the loss of a spouse or partner include:

- Identifying changes in life and considering how you can pace and phase in the adjustments needed;
- Accepting help from others;
- Communicating your needs so that you get the help you require from the right people;
- Learning new skills to manage tasks or responsibilities that had previously been taken up by your late spouse or partner;
- Setting boundaries to have a sense of control and to decide what you will spend your energy on;
- Making new meanings and reconfiguring your identity as part of the rebuilding process;
- Attending a support group. This has been found to be useful in helping one adjust more easily to widowhood (Vachon, 1980); and

- Establishing continuing bonds with your loved one through remembrance strategies, so that you can feel connected. Even though he or she is physically not present, our loved one remains close to our heart. You may wish to create a memory box to do so.



Remembrance Strategy: Memory Box

A grief memory box can help us remember a loved one. Creating one can be a very healing experience. Here's how:

Step 1: Choose a box and decorate it

You can buy a nice gift box or use a wooden case and decorate it with fabric, flowers, ribbons or images you or your loved one liked.



Step 2: Gather significant items that remind you of your loved one

This can itself be a sorting process. The items to be put into the box can include personal possessions like a diary, clothes or a watch; photos, obituary, identification articles, toys, artwork and letters, among others.



Step 3: Visit your memory box

Review the items and their significance and memories when you feel a need to remember your loved one. You can allocate a particular time each day to deeply engage with the grief. The time frame can be kept to in a way that works for you, i.e., burning of a candle or playing a music track.



Step 4: Close your memory box

Closing the memory box is a way of disengaging with grief's intensity so that one can attend to everyday routines and fulfil commitments of daily lives. This provides structure and space to regulate reactions to possible triggers of grief.



Losing A Parent

A parent's death can have a significant effect on a child's emotional and mental well-being. For bereaved children, this can be a particularly stressful event which involves disruptions in many aspects of their life. (Please refer to the section on **Supporting Children Who Grieve** for more information on supporting bereaved children.) Even as an adult, the death of a parent is devastating as we are often losing someone who loved us unconditionally and gave us a tangible sense of safety and stability from the cradle where life began. While we understand that the loss of a parent is inevitable and even a normal part of life, this does not make the pain more bearable.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE COMMON GRIEF REACTIONS AFTER THE LOSS OF A PARENT?

Here are some of the common grief reactions after the loss of a parent:

YOUNG CHILDREN

Children are generally 'intermittent grievers' who swing between grieving and getting on with normal lives after a loss. They do not grieve continuously. One may see them crying one minute and the next they are playing or talking with friends. They may or may not react very much to the news of the death of a loved one, depending on a number of factors including their age, developmental stage, personality, background and even previous loss experiences. They do grieve but they need time to process what has been conveyed to them.



Even when they understand, they cannot articulate their thoughts and emotions like adults do. Younger children may ask the same questions often as they try to make sense of difficult information and we may need to repeat the same information frequently. Some may try not to talk about the person if they think it upsets the surviving parent.

Here are other possible behavioural changes to watch out for:

- Clinginess could be a sign the child needs reassurance;
- Maintaining a distance might be a means to avoid getting hurt and being left behind;
- Aggression externalises the helplessness felt;
- Regression when children return to behaviours marking a younger age (for example, wetting or soiling themselves) could be a sign of insecurity;
- Lack of concentration; and
- Sleep issues.

TEENAGERS

Bereaved teenagers frequently feel distanced from their peers after the loss of a parent. Some perceive that their friends do not understand their loss and lack empathy. The grief can be deepened by existing school and friendship issues. Teenagers may appear more moody and hostile as they struggle to manage the strong emotions of loss. Others could bottle up their feelings and adopt silence to avoid feeling the pain. Or they may turn to their friends for a listening ear rather than an adult.



Across the ages, here are other common grief reactions:

- Feeling lost and empty;
- Feeling the loss of unconditional love and emotional support;
- Fear of the future; and
- Feeling the loss of connection to the past (one's childhood).

ADULT CHILDREN

It is common for adult children to feel a range of reactions after losing a parent. These reactions may feel different from day to day. Besides shock, grief and numbness, one may also feel regret, guilt or anger concerning what had been done or not done. As they grieve, they have to juggle work and other life responsibilities. Exhaustion may result. On the other hand, if one had been a caregiver to a parent who was suffering from a long-term life-changing illness, one may feel a sense of relief after they die. This is normal, especially if one had witnessed the suffering and wanted the loved one's pain to end.

What are the possible risk factors or challenges?

Bereaved children (80%) generally cope reasonably well by the end of the first or second year after loss. Here are some of the possible risk factors and challenges to pay attention to:



Children who do not do as well tend to **come from families experiencing numerous stressors and changes** as a result of the death or have a surviving parent who is younger in age, have mental health conditions or not coping well with the loss. Studies found that such children showed increased anxiety and depression issues, lower esteem, as well as sleep and health problems over time.

Children who lose a mother

may face a unique set of challenges than those who lose a father; in part because the loss of a mother is accompanied by more changes to routines. In many family contexts, this signals the loss of an emotional caretaker. Mother loss is associated with more emotional and / or behavioural problems where children act out. Parental dating in the early stage of loss was also associated with withdrawn behaviours, acting-out behaviours and certain somatic symptoms, such as abdominal pain, among children.



Some children display **weaker belief in their self-efficacy**. This might play out in weaker school performance or a reluctance to try new things. In some cases where the routines are disrupted, bereaved children may test existing boundaries set when the deceased parent was around.

A parent's death can have a significant effect on adult children's psychological well-being too. They may experience increased psychological distress and reduced sense of personal mastery following a parent's death (Umberson, 1990). **Unresolved grief reactions** related to a parent's death have been sometimes linked to depression, suicidal ideation and other psychiatric symptoms.



WHAT CAN HELP ONE TO ADJUST BETTER AFTER LOSING A PARENT?

Three things are important for bereaved **children and teenagers** after the loss of a parent: support, nurturance and continuity (Silverman, 2000).

Need	How to meet this need
To know that they will be safe and cared for, and their needs would continue to be met despite losing a parent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide upfront reassurance and addressing this topic early and directly even when the children do not initiate it.• Continue routines to allay any anxiety and help children feel safer.

Need	How to meet this need
Very young children can be egocentric and attribute events to their own doing. They need to know that they did not cause the death.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Give them clear, age-appropriate information.• Provide them with opportunities to talk about the death and ask questions. This can support them emotionally, helping them to cope better.

Need	How to meet this need
Children do and need to mourn their loved one.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engage them in activities that allow them to express their grief and remember the deceased parent. Some of the activities can include making a memory box, or simply cooking and enjoying the deceased parent's favourite food and sharing stories about him or her.



For **adult children**, accessing social support by talking to people who have gone through a parental loss experience or friends or family members who are patient and willing to listen have been found to be useful. Besides being heard and understood as they discuss their personal feelings and perspectives, they can openly grieve as part of the healing process.

Even returning to work has been deemed by some to provide respite from grief. Jobs which allow flexible schedules or time off for caregiving or mourning are perceived as compassionate gestures by employers. Having a religion, being part of a supportive faith community and participating in religious activities / spiritual traditions may bring comfort and positively impact psychological well-being.

Losing A Child

In so many ways, losing a child could feel like losing a part of ourselves. A child bears the hopes, expectations, dreams, familial history, identities and narratives within his or her birth. Strong parent-child bonds render the loss a heart-crushing one and its impact can linger for years. One feels a complex range of difficult emotions and friends and family may not know how to respond or provide the needed support, resulting in bereaved parents feeling isolated. Furthermore, they may need to cope with changing relational dynamics within the family after such a loss.



What are some of the common grief reactions after the loss of a child?

The early grieving period is characterized by intense yearning for the child who died, to hold him or her again and even to be reunited with the child. Besides feeling overwhelmed and heartbroken, parents experiencing child loss could feel a sense of helplessness and frustration due to the often sudden and untimely nature of the death. There may be intrusive images and flashback of the circumstances of the death. Some grieving parents struggle with sleep disruptions and unsettling dreams.

Anger and guilt are frequently common reactions. One may feel anger towards people in direct or indirect contact with the child, including one's spouse, other family members, physicians and nurses caring for the child and teachers and peers in the child's school, among others. You may also be angry with your child for leaving you. Sometimes, the anger is directed at yourself in the form of self-blame. You may question your own competency as a parent and focus on your failure to protect your child or care for him properly. A sense of causal guilt could accompany child loss if death occurred due to an inherited disorder in the family.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISK FACTORS OR CHALLENGES?

Some of the risks and challenges of losing a child are as follows:

Avoiding conversations on the loss or suppressing information surrounding the child who died.

This can hinder parents' own grieving process and that of the other family members. Without honest and open communication, other children in the family may seek out answers on their own. In some cases, younger children may attribute blame to themselves.

Inadequate care or overprotection of the surviving children

Inadequate care of surviving children may result from bereaved parents struggling with the loss and being unable to be fully present to support them. Some parents may make substitute the surviving siblings for the lost child by projecting certain qualities or expectations on them.

They may also be overly protective of the living children.

Different grief expressions and coping styles of parents

Different grief expressions and coping styles between parents can result in possible tension and strains in the relationship. One may feel the care for surviving children should take precedence over time devoted to grief therapy, the other may feel one's grief is being dismissed and minimized when told this. In addition, within one's community, there may be unspoken norms and expectations about how a parent should grieve and this makes further demand on coping.

Coping with secondary losses

Bereaved parents face the challenge of learning to live without the child and coping with the secondary losses associated with an absent child. Dealing with the possessions of their departed child is a struggle. Some parents may even attempt to fill the emptiness they feel by having another child soon after the loss.



What can help one to adjust better after losing a child?

It is helpful to have **open and honest communication within the family** and between parents as much as possible, acknowledging the loss of the child without expecting the other children to fill the void left by the child who died. For the younger siblings, except in situations where there were some causal links, it should be made clear that the death did not happen because of them.

If parents need time to grieve, it would be helpful to **tap on support networks to alleviate caregiving duties** for surviving children. Communicate clearly about the kind of support or assistance you need, how you want your grief to be responded to, what helps and what is unhelpful. If necessary, attempt to **set some boundaries**.

Note to Self

THE IMPORTANCE OF SETTING BOUNDARIES



Doing what matters

Allows you to devote the limited time and energy you have during grieving to handle things that matter most to you.

Caring for loved ones

You get to continue the relationships with people around you while caring for yourself and your surviving loved ones.

Caring for self

You get to decide what is in your best interest. When you are grieving such a devastating loss, it is not an act of selfishness.

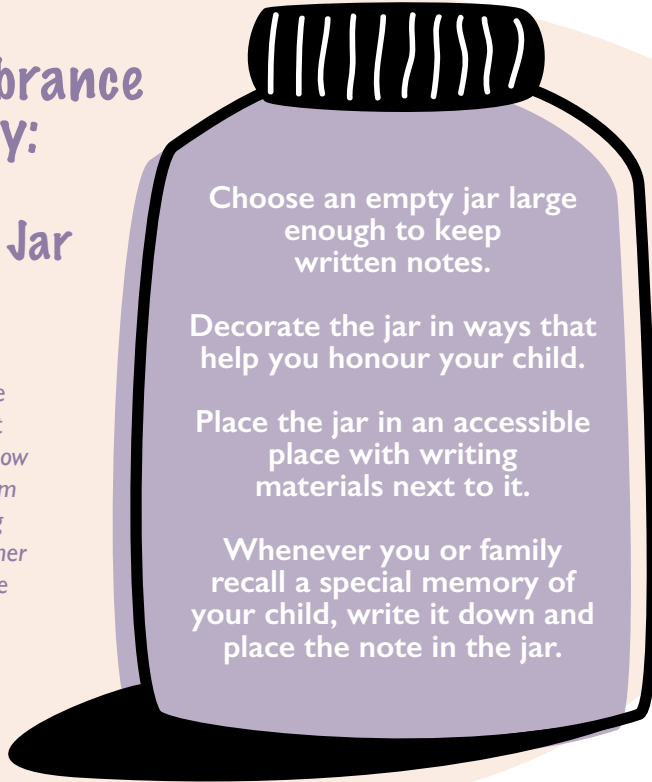
Memory and love are key themes in child loss. Parents may wish to **consider appropriate ways and activities to remember the child as a family**. The Memory Jar is a good way to do this. Parents could choose to keep a child's room intact for some time after the loss. There are no right or wrong ways to do this, except what feels right to honour the child and the relationship between the child and the family.

Remembrance Strategy:

Memory Jar

Additional Tip:

You can also write short letters to let your child know how much you miss him or her or anything you want him or her to know and place them in the jar.



The decision to have another child is best postponed after a child's death until parents have the opportunity to mourn their loss and **work through their grief**. In addition, **joining a support group** could help in normalizing grief and allow you to cope in a safe community of people with similar experiences.


Grieving a lost child is painful but necessary. Remember that this is a very personal process. When grief is processed, most parents find it waning in intensity over time and they learn to establish continuing bonds with the child who died. Their sadness changes and they remember their child with a deep love, rather than with deep sorrow. Comfort can be drawn from knowing that the pain will diminish and bereaved parents can find ways to live with grief and loss.

Supporting Children Who Grieve

Grief is hard even for adults who have more inner resources and external support to deal with the loss. Children grieve but not all have enough understanding of grief or the ability to cope on their own. Most do sense the sadness of adults around them and know that something has changed. While we cannot protect our children from the pain of losing a loved one, we can create a safe space for them to grieve and support them in developing healthy ways of coping and making adjustments.

My children do not seem to grieve. They are still playing and it is as if nothing has happened. Why?

Most children do not grieve at the level and frequency that adults do. They are able to compartmentalize their grief and participate in the routines of the day even when grieving. A child may go from crying one minute to playing the next. Fluctuating moods and actions do not mean that he or she is not sad or unaffected by the loss. Playing can be a way of coping, even a defense mechanism for children to prevent themselves from becoming overwhelmed by their emotions.



4 Signs that a Child is Grieving

- Fluctuating moods and actions
- Being clingy to adults
- Requesting to sleep with adults or with the lights on
- Regression of a milestone previously cleared (e.g., Bed-wetting)

Should I talk about death with children?

Children are frequently forgotten grievers as families sometimes attempt to shield them from the death and loss-related information. It is good to discuss the loss with children and encourage them to talk about the person who died and express their feelings. Do bear in mind that they cannot reflect on or articulate their thoughts and emotions like adults. The younger the children are, the more limited they may be in expressing themselves through words. Here are some ways to start:

HOW TO TALK TO CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH

Read good children's books with themes about death together.

Use creative channels such as drawing pictures, building a scrapbook, engaging in sand play to support them in expressing their grief.

Find meaningful ways to start a conversation and elicit responses from children who are grieving.

Look at photo albums together and allow them to tell their stories.



How much information should I share with children?

Children's understanding of death varies according to the different stages of development and often changes as they develop emotionally and socially. It is not necessary to provide too much information as it could be confusing or prove to be overwhelming for them.

Very young children may not understand death as a permanent event. They may think that a loved one would come back if they behaved well. School age children begin to understand death as permanent, but they may still have many questions about it. There is a need to begin where the children are and clarify any doubts, or they may seek their own answers to questions that are beyond their ability to understand. Be age-appropriate and have open conversations when engaging children in talking about their loss.



Supporting Grieving Children

- **Be age-appropriate.**
- **Share your grief without overwhelming them.**
- **Provide reassurance that they will always be loved and cared for.**
- **Encourage them to express their feelings and validate them.**
- **Answer their questions directly without using euphemisms.**
- **Help the child understand that he or she is not to be blamed for the death.**



Am I too blunt and direct when talking about death with children?

One could start by answering children's questions in a realistic, direct and straightforward manner. Never use euphemisms when discussing death with children. Being direct avoids causing unnecessary anxiety and fear in children and allows them to start learning healthy coping skills.

Using euphemisms: Why can't I tell my child "Ah Ma went to a faraway place"?

- The use of euphemisms can be bewildering for children.
- They may have unrealistic expectations of the deceased being alive again.
- It can cause unnecessary fear and anxiety.
- Knowing the truth helps them to start learning healthy coping skills.
- Being direct allows trust to be built.

Do not brush children off when they ask the same questions several times. As they try to make sense of difficult information, adults may need to repeat the same information often.

Understand that children's attention span will require us to have short but frequent conversations with them. Do be patient when engaging our children during such challenging times.



Is it appropriate for children to attend funerals?

The decision to allow children to attend funerals is a personal one. You may wish to discuss this with the family and the child involved. Children who are allowed to attend funerals can get an opportunity to say goodbye to their loved one and this can be helpful for providing closure. However, if you perceive that your child might not be ready for such an emotionally-intense experience, it might be better to give this a miss. You may also consider if your decision aligns with your spiritual traditions.

If children are allowed to attend a funeral, bear the following in mind:



PREPARE

Before the funeral, prepare your children, especially if they are young, about what they might expect or experience at a funeral. Ask if they would like to attend. Never force a child to attend it if they do not want to.



PROVIDE AUTONOMY

Provide children with the autonomy to decide how long they would like to stay at the funeral service. Respect their decision to leave when they feel the need. This gives them a sense of control over a situation they are probably encountering for the first time. It can be helpful to have a friend or family member ready to take them out if necessary.

If you decide that a funeral is not the best way for your child to say goodbye and have closure, you can consider other remembrance activities that are meaningful for the child. Completing a grief collage may be a possible way to do this.

Remembrance Strategy:

Grief Collage

Get an A4 poster board, glue and lots of old magazines.



Look through the magazine pages for images (faces or objects) or words / phrases that reflect thoughts or feelings you associate with your grief experience.

Glue images to the poster board to form a collage. Add captions, quotes or pen a poem if you like.

Be creative. Besides using magazine images, you could also draw your own or use photos that are meaningful to you.

Should I talk about the afterlife with children?

It could be helpful to talk about the afterlife to help a grieving child. You may share your religious beliefs about the afterlife with your child, especially if this provides an understanding about death and reassurance regarding what happened to their loved one. If you are not religious, you can still comfort your child with the idea that our loved one continues to live in the minds and hearts of those in the family, and our relationship with him or her will continue, albeit in a different way, despite the separation.

Should I hide my tears from my child?

Many people, especially parents, avoid crying in front of children for fear of triggering their grief. Sometimes this may arise from 'advice' from family members or simply expectations to 'stay strong' for their children. It is all right to grieve before your children.

“Why it is ok to cry in front of our children”



Children observe their environment for cues on how to behave. They may imitate the grieving behavior of their parents.

Showing your emotions reassures them that feeling sad, or crying is a normal reaction to loss. They do not need to hide their grief and feel isolated.

However, do remember to manage your own emotions to avoid overwhelming your children and model healthy ways of coping for them, if possible. Let your child know that even though you are sad, you are doing your best to cope, and will seek help if necessary. Listen to them when they need to talk about the person who died. Assure your child that you will still care for them even though you are sad.

What other concerns might my child have?

Some children may have irrational thinking after losing someone, for example, they may think they were the cause of the death or worry that they would lose others in the family, including those who are caring for their needs. Understand that such concerns

are common in young children. It is not a display of self-centeredness or that they are thinking only about themselves. We can build emotional safety and enhance stability in the following ways:



Teenagers understand death the way adults do, but they may not have enough skills to manage the experience adequately. Moreover, as they attempt to cope with the issues of growing up and identity, the death of a friend or loved one may confuse or frustrate them further. Teenagers may not always be open to understand others' point of view. Some are uncomfortable about expressing their grief openly as this increases their sense of vulnerability. Others may attempt to alleviate pain through risk-taking behaviours such as using alcohol or drugs.

What else can I do to support grieving children?

Routines are often a source of comfort and they **provide structure and a sense of normalcy** for children. The predictability of what would happen in a day allows them to feel in control and understand that life can continue despite their grief. As routines are closely linked to having their needs met, they **give children reassurance** that they are still loved and cared for. As such, after the loss of their loved one, do not impose drastic changes but keep the children's daily routines intact as much as possible.

To help teenagers grieving the loss of a loved one, **check in** to ask them how they are feeling, but **do not force them to talk** if they are not ready to. Assure them that you are there for them. Be attentive and **provide a listening ear** when they do wish to have a conversation. Teenagers are more open and respond better when adults ask more questions, provide fewer answers and do not attempt to give advice.

Supporting Elderly Who Grieve

Grief frequently takes an emotional toll on the elderly. Feeling overwhelmed and helpless can be part of their grieving experience. Some seniors may feel isolated in grief and desire company while others may pretend that everything is fine or withdraw socially due to the belief that they should not burden their family or loved ones. This often deepens a sense of loneliness, anxiety and vulnerability. When supporting elderly in grief, assurance of our presence and time, being patient with their tears and inviting them to recall memories are helpful. Not hurrying them to get out of their sadness and being persistent in looking out for them even when they insist everything is fine can be comforting and reassuring.

Is it normal for the elderly to cry all the time after a loss?

Grief is a highly personal experience. The intensity of sorrow that one experiences and individual expression of grief could vary. Crying is part of the natural healing process and helps one to cope with the loss. Crying all the time does not mean one is more impacted by the loss or is in danger of more difficult outcomes. If the elderly is prevented from crying when there is a need to, it makes the grieving process more challenging and isolating for them as he or she may choose to cry when alone. Yet one cannot avoid experiencing grief. Families should not attempt to rush the elderly through the grief experience by asking them not to cry.



Should I avoid talking about their loved one?

It is a misconception to assume that not talking about the loved one who has died would make one's pain more bearable and prevent triggers. Sorrow originates from the place of loss, not what we say when attending to that loss. A concern that the bereaved has is how their loved one might be forgotten with time. Being prevented from talking about their loved one may cause the elderly bereaved to 'bottle up' and silence their grief, contributing to a more difficult grieving process. Conversely, saying the name of their loved one and inviting them to share significant memories allow the past to be revisited and continuing bonds to be established so that they can always remember their loved one in their heart.

Will helping to clear their loved one's belongings make them less sad?

There is no right or wrong answer concerning the disposal of a loved one's belongings. For some, keeping them is a way of maintaining a bond with the deceased (and clearing means cutting off ties and forgetting him or her), while others see it as a lack of acceptance and a refusal to move on.

LOVED ONE'S BELONGINGS

Should we clear?

FOR



- Helpful to clear a loved one's belongings if seeing them affects mental and emotional health of the bereaved elderly (reminders of difficult memories).
- Sorting process supports grieving if going through the belongings facilitates recall of happier memories, expression of gratitude and meaning-making.

PAUSE



- Helping to clear a loved one's belongings will not make a bereaved elderly less sad if they feel pressured to do so and results in guilt and regret.
- He or she may perceive it as dismissing the cherished memories attached to the items.

Everyone is different. The key is perhaps to consider the bereaved elderly's readiness, and what keeping the belongings means to them.

Is it helpful to encourage the bereaved elderly to keep busy?

It is tempting to suggest activities for the bereaved elderly to keep them occupied or even to distract them so that they do not think about their loss. This could help them in the short term but it does not take away the pain or end their grief. If the purpose of keeping busy is for one to escape grief and avoid facing the loss, it can lead to delayed or prolonged grief. However, a healthy balance between these activities and those devoted to feeling, expressing and processing grief would promote healing.



It is very hard to encourage the elderly to talk about their grief. What can I do?

There are many reasons why the elderly might not talk about their grief. While some openly share their grief, others deal with their emotions more privately. Those who prefer to cope through activities might not be inclined to verbally share their experiences. Allow the elderly to grieve in ways that are helpful for them. If the elderly fears being judged or worry that they might be a burden to others, they may choose to hold back. Grieving older adults need to feel secure during this challenging time and will need the love and acceptance of those around them.

“

When someone is going through a storm,
your silent presence is more powerful than
a million empty words.

Thema Davis

”



It is important to let your loved one know it is okay to grieve and mourn and you are there for them. Our quiet presence and a listening ear may be more valuable for holding space for the elderly bereaved than words. One might also reminisce old times or offer them a comforting touch as a less threatening conversation starter. Here are other projects to try when supporting a bereaved elderly:

Letting our Grief Speak

Activities of story telling and story making allow us to make meaning from what has been lost. It allows one to:

- Use creative methods to start conversations for healing
- Remember our loved one and adjust to a new world without them through the reauthoring process
- Integrate our loss experience into our life story as a way to rebuild identity
- Construct empowering stories of the future by exploring possibilities after loss

Stories heal
because they
transform us.
We make meaning
and become
whole through
them.

Here are some narrative projects to consider when supporting a bereaved elderly:

- Sharing of loved one's favourite food or recipes
- Memorial space (in the home)
- Guided journaling and poetry-writing
- Photography and videography projects
- Visiting and sharing about a place of memory
- Expressive art (Grief Collage)
- Creating a memory jar

Should I ensure that the elderly go for counselling or participate in a support group after a loss?

Depending on the needs of the elderly, counselling and support groups are frequently useful in helping them cope with grief.

Counselling

- Provides opportunity for the bereaved to express their grief and process the loss
- Useful for those who wish to adapt and reintegrate into a post-loss life

- Offers human contact and friendship for elderly persons
- Helpful for those with diminished social network or experience high levels of isolation (Cohen, 2000)

Support Group

However, one should note that not all elderly bereaved require counselling or need to be part of a support group. Some of them show resilience and can cope relatively well independently. Those who are more advanced in age might have physical conditions (for example, they may be less mobile or have hearing issues) that prevent them from attending or benefiting from group work. Families should not force elderly grieving persons to attend counselling or support group if they are unwilling. Death has already robbed them of a sense of control. Remember that love and presence of family may often be preferred by the elderly, trumping help from external sources.

How do I support an elderly grieving person who has suicide ideation?

It is common for elderly grieving persons to say they do not wish to live after losing their loved one. However, this is different from having the ideation or desire to end one's life. Most persons who are suicidal express their thoughts and plans to kill themselves concretely before they put it into action.

If an elderly bereaved expresses their sense of hopelessness and yearning by saying “I wish I could follow my loved one...”, “It’s meaningless to live on... ” or “What’s the point of living now that she is gone...”, please do the following:



- Do not judge or criticize them by saying “Stop saying so.”, “It is wrong to attempt suicide.”, “How can you be so selfish to think of killing yourself?”
- Do not minimize their feelings by saying “Everything will be alright.” or “Everyone has to die one day, take it easy.”
- Show your empathy by saying “It must be very tough for you after your loved one passed away.” or “I know it could be very miserable for you now.”
- Check if they have suicidal thoughts by asking “Do you have suicidal thoughts?”, “Can you share with me about what is on your mind?”
- Tell them you love and care for them. You would seek help for them while journeying with them through this difficult time.
- Contact the following for professional support, if necessary:
 - Samaritans of Singapore (SOS). They can be reached via phonecall at 1767 or email them at pat@sos.org.sg;
 - Family Service Centre in your community; or
 - Dial 995 for emergency help or approach your nearby Accident & Emergency Department if a person is actively suicidal (that is, one has concrete plans regarding when, what and how to end his or her life and may be very close to doing so).

What are other practical ways I can offer support?

When supporting an elderly in grief, try to keep in regular contact through phone calls or visits. This gives them something to look forward to and increases a sense of well-being as they know they are not alone. Ask them how you can support them and offer specific help once you understand their needs better.

Supporting Elderly in Grief



- Encourage them to express their feelings and validate them.
- Let them know it is ok to cry.
- Do not be afraid to talk about their loved one.
- Remind them not to make major changes right away.
- Cook for and eat together with them.
- Remind them of the importance of self-care and accompany them for medical appointments.
- Help them with the paperwork.
- Bring the grandchildren or the pets over.

Reaching Out For Support

How does a counsellor help me in coping with grief?

A counsellor provides a safe space for you to express your grief and facilitates processing work for your thoughts and emotions after a loss. Through counselling, you may gain new perspectives, insight, and access inner resources to complement your current coping strategies.

What are the differences among medical social workers, counsellors, psychologists and psychiatrists?

Medical Social Worker (MSW) – A trained professional who provides support to individuals or families through case management and / or psychosocial-emotional support. This is the person to speak with if you are looking for practical resources regarding patient's caregiving, financial assistance, discussion of care arrangement, stress management and coping strategies, among others.

Counsellor – A trained professional who provides emotional and counselling support to individuals, couples, and families. He or she supports one in processing a range of emotions and experiences to increase self-awareness towards grief reactions, build emotional-coping capacity, develop new coping strategies in order to adjust and reintegrate into a post-loss life.

Psychologist – A trained professional who assesses, treats or advises individuals who seek help for issues that are severe enough to be debilitating, such as severe anxieties or phobias.

Psychiatrist – A medical doctor who specialises in mental health diagnoses and prescribes medications, if necessary, to treat a mental health condition.

Is counselling support available in Assisi Hospice?

Our Bereavement Care team comprises trained counsellors who specialise in grief work. We provide counselling support to family members / significant next-of-kin of patients cared for by Assisi Hospice. We do not charge a fee for the service. You may email us at bereavementcare@assisihospice.org.sg or request for a referral through your healthcare team in Assisi Hospice. We welcome referrals made at any point of time in your grieving journey. Our services include:

- Individual counselling;
- Groupwork / Support Group;
- Grief Cafe; and
- Befriending Service

Ways to reach us:



Email:

bereavementcare@assisihospice.org.sg

Phone:

9787 9890

(Monday to Friday, from 9am to 4pm,
except Public Holidays)

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My Grief's Compass with us.





*If grieving is a trip into the unknown
I'll make sure I keep the compass and a glimpse of your smile
I cannot tell when I'll be back
But I am sure there'll be a day
I will be here again
With a smile of mine, that was nourished by you...*



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