

Tips for Coping with Grief

No two people grieve alike—what works for one may not work for another.



The following are many ideas to help people who are mourning a loved one's death. Different kinds of losses dictate different responses, so not all of these ideas will suite everyone. Treat this list for what it is: a gathering of assorted suggestions that various people have tried with success. Perhaps what helped them through their grief will help you. The emphasis here is upon specific, practical ideas.

Talk Regularly with a Friend

Talking with another about what you think and feel is one of the best things you can do for yourself. It helps relieve some of the pressure you may feel, it can give you a sense of perspective, and it keeps you in touch with others. Look for someone who's a good listener and a caring soul. Then speak what's on our mind and in your heart. If this feels one-sided, let that be okay for this period of your life.

Chances are the other person will find meaning in what they are doing. And the time will come when you'll have the chance to be a good listener for someone else. You'll be a better listener then, if you're a good talker now.

Carry or Wear a Linking Object

Carry something in your pocket or purse that reminds you of the one who died—a keepsake they gave you perhaps, or a small object they once carried or used, or a memento you select for just this purpose. You might wear a piece of their jewelry in the same way.

Whenever you want, reach for or gaze upon this object and remember what it signifies.

Create a Memory Book

Compile photographs which document your loved one's life. Arrange them into some sort of order so they tell a story. Add other elements if you want: diplomas, newspaper clippings, awards, accomplishments, reminders of significant events. Put all this in a special binder and keep it out for people to look at if they wish. Go through it on your own if you desire. Reminisce as you do so.

Recall Your Dreams

Your dreams often have important things to say about your feelings and about your relationship with the one who died. Your dreams may be scary or sad, especially early on. They may seem weird or crazy to you. You may find that your loved one appears in your dreams. Accept your dreams for what they are and see what you can learn from them. No one knows that better than you.

Tell People What Helps You

People around you may not understand what you need. So tell them. If hearing your loved one's name spoken aloud by others feels good, say so. If you need more time alone, or assistance with chores you're unable to complete, or an occasional hug, be honest. People can't read your mind, so you'll have to speak it.

Ask for a Copy of the Memorial Service

If the funeral liturgy or memorial service held special meaning for you because of what was spoken or read, ask for the words. Whoever participated in that ritual will feel gratified that what they prepared was appreciated. Turn to these words whenever you want. Some people find these thoughts provide even more help weeks and months after the service.

Plant Something Living as a Memorial

Plant a flower, a bush, or a tree in memory of the one who died. Or plant several things. Do this ceremoniously if you wish, perhaps with others present. If you do this planting where you live, you can watch it grow and change day by day. Season by season. You can even make it a part of special times of remembrance in the future.



Spend Time in Your Loved One's Space

If it's what you want to do, you may sit in the other's favorite chair, or lie in their bed, or just stand in their room among their possessions. Do this if it brings you comfort. But don't do it if it feels too awkward. You'll know quickly enough what's right for you.

Journal

Write out your thoughts and feelings. Do this whenever you feel the urge, but do it at least several times a week, if not several times a day. Don't censor what you write – be just as honest as you can. In time, go back through your writings and notice how you're changing and growing.

Do Something to Help Someone Else

Step out of your own problems from time to time and devote your attention to someone else. Offer a gift or your service. Do this for yourself as much as for the other. Feel good about your worth.



Write Down Your Lessons

Your grief experience will have much to teach you. From time to time reflect upon what it is you're learning. State it as plainly as you're able. Carry those lessons with you as you go about your day.

Write to the Person Who Died

Write letters or other messages to your loved one, thoughts you wish you could express if they were present. Preserve what you write in your journal if you wish, or on stationery, or on your computer. Or, if you wish, discard what you've written after awhile. You'll find this urge to write the other will eventually leave you, but for awhile it can be a real release for you, as well as a real connection.

Consider a Support Group

Spending time with a small group of people who have undergone a similar life experience can be very therapeutic. You can discover how natural your feelings are.

You can learn from the experiences and the ideas of others. You can find backing as you make the changes you must. Support groups are not for everyone, of course. But many people have come to swear by them. You won't know unless you try.

Light a Candle at Mealtime

Especially if you eat alone, but even if you don't, consider lighting a taper at the table in memory of your loved one. Pause to remember them as you light it. Keep your loved nearby in this time of sustenance. You might light a candle at other times as well as you sit alone in the evening, for instance.



Create a Memory Area at Home

In a space that feels appropriate, arrange a small table that honors the person: a framed photograph or two, perhaps a prized possession or award, or something they created, or something they loved. This might be placed on a small table, or a mantel, or a desk. Some people like to use a grouping of candles, representing not just the person who died, but others who have died as well. In that case, a variety of candles can be arranged, each representing a unique life.



Use Your Hands

Sometimes there is value in doing repetitive things with your hands, something you don't have to think about very much because it becomes second nature. Knitting and crocheting are like that. So are carving, woodworking, polishing, solving jigsaw puzzles, painting braiding, shoveling, washing and countless other activities.

Begin Your Day with Your Loved One

If your grief is young, you'll probably wake up thinking of that person anyway. So why not decide that you'll include them from the start? Focus this time in a positive way.

Bring to your mind fulfilling memories. Recall lessons this person taught you, gifts they gave you. Think about how you can spend your day in ways that would be in keeping with your loved one's best self, and with your best self. Then carry that best self with you through your day.

Invite Someone to be Your Phone Pal

If you grief and sadness hit you especially hard at times and you have no one nearby to turn to, ask someone you trust to be your telephone buddy. Ask their permission for you to call them whenever you feel you're at loose ends, day or night. Don't abuse this privilege, of course. And remember that someday it will be payback time—someday you'll make yourself available to help someone else in the same way you've been helped. That will help you accept the care you're receiving.



Structure Alone Time

You may have your full share of alone time, in which case you'll want to ignore this suggestion. But if you're often among family, friends, and colleagues, make sure you also have time all by yourself. A large part of the grieving process involved what goes on inside yourself—your thoughts, your feelings, your memories, your hopes and dreams. So allow yourself the opportunity to go inside so you can grow inside.

Listen to Music

Choose music you believe will help you at a given moment, whether it's contemporary or ancient, instrumental or vocal, secular or religious. Let the sounds surround you and soothe you. Take this music with you, if you wish, as you go about your day.



Do Something Your Loved One Would Enjoy

Remember the one who died in your own unique way. One widowed woman has a special sauerkraut meal once a year. She doesn't like this tangy dish herself, but it was her husband's favorite, and she finds solace in remembering him that way. There are probably a hundred different things you could do that once brought meaning and satisfaction that don't have to end with the death of that person.



Engage Your Soul

You'll want to do this your own way. Some people meditate, some pray, and some spend time alone in nature. Some worship with a congregation and others do it on their own. Many grieving people begin to sense that all of us, living and dead, are connected on a spiritual level in a way that defies easy understanding. Include your soul as you grow through your grief.

Change Some Things

As soon as it seems right, alter some things in your home to make clear this significant change that has occurred. Rearrange a room or replace a piece of furniture or give away certain items that will never again be used in your home. This does not mean to remove all signs of the one who died. It does mean not treating your home or your loved one's room as a shrine which cannot be altered in any way.

Allow Yourself to Laugh

Sometimes something funny will happen to you, just like it used to. Sometimes you'll recall something hilarious that happened in the past. When that happens, go ahead and laugh if it feels funny to you. You won't be desecrating your loved one's memory. You'll be consecrating their love of life and your own too.



Allow Yourself to Cry

Crying goes naturally with grief. Tears well up and fall even when you least expect them. Subdued sniffles can become racking sobs on a moment's notice. It may feel awkward to you, but this is not unusual for a person in your situation. A good rule of thumb is this: if you feel like crying, then cry. If not, then don't. Some grieving people seldom cry—it's just their way.

Talk to the Other One

If it helps, you might talk with the one who died as you drive alone in your car, or as you stand beside the grave, or as you muster up your courage to make an important decision. This talking might be out loud or under your breath. Either way, it's the same: you're simply wishing the other person was with you so you could talk things over, and for the moment you're doing the best you can to continue the conversation. This inclination to converse will eventually go away when the time is right.

Create or Commission a Memory Quilt

Sew or invite others to sew with you. Or hire someone to sew for you. However you get it completed, put together a wall hanging or a bedroom quilt that remembers the important life events of the one who died.

Read How Others Have Responded to a Loved One's Death

You may feel that your own grief is all you can handle. But if you'd like to look at the ways others have done it, try C.S. Lewis's "A Grief Observed," Lynn Caine's "Widow," John Bramblett's "When Good-Bye Is Forever," or Nicholas Wolterstorff's "Lament for a Son." There are many others. Check with a counselor or librarian.

Take a Day Off

When the mood is just right, take a one-day vacation. Travel somewhere or stay inside by yourself. Be very active or don't do anything at all. Just make it your day, whatever that means for you.

Invite Someone to Give You Feedback

Select someone you trust, preferably someone familiar with the workings of grief, to give you their reaction when you ask for it. If you want to check out how clearly you're thinking, how accurately you're remembering, how effectively you're coping, go to that person.

Pose your questions, then listen to the responses. What you choose to do with that information will be up to you.

Monitor Signs of Dependency

While it's normal to become more dependent upon others for awhile immediately after a death, it will not be helpful to continue in that role long-term. Watch for signs that you're prolonging your need for assistance. Congratulate yourself when you do things for yourself.

Give Yourself Rewards

Be kind to yourself in your grief. Do those things for yourself that you really enjoy, perhaps at the end of a long day, or in the midst of a lonely time. Treat yourself to a favorite meal or delicacy. Get a massage. Buy some flowers. Do something frivolous that makes you feel good. Then soak up those moments as fully as you can.

Contact Carebridge

Use your Carebridge EAP benefit for confidential assistance finding a counselor to work one-on-one with you, as well as to locate support groups and other community resources to help you through your grief.

