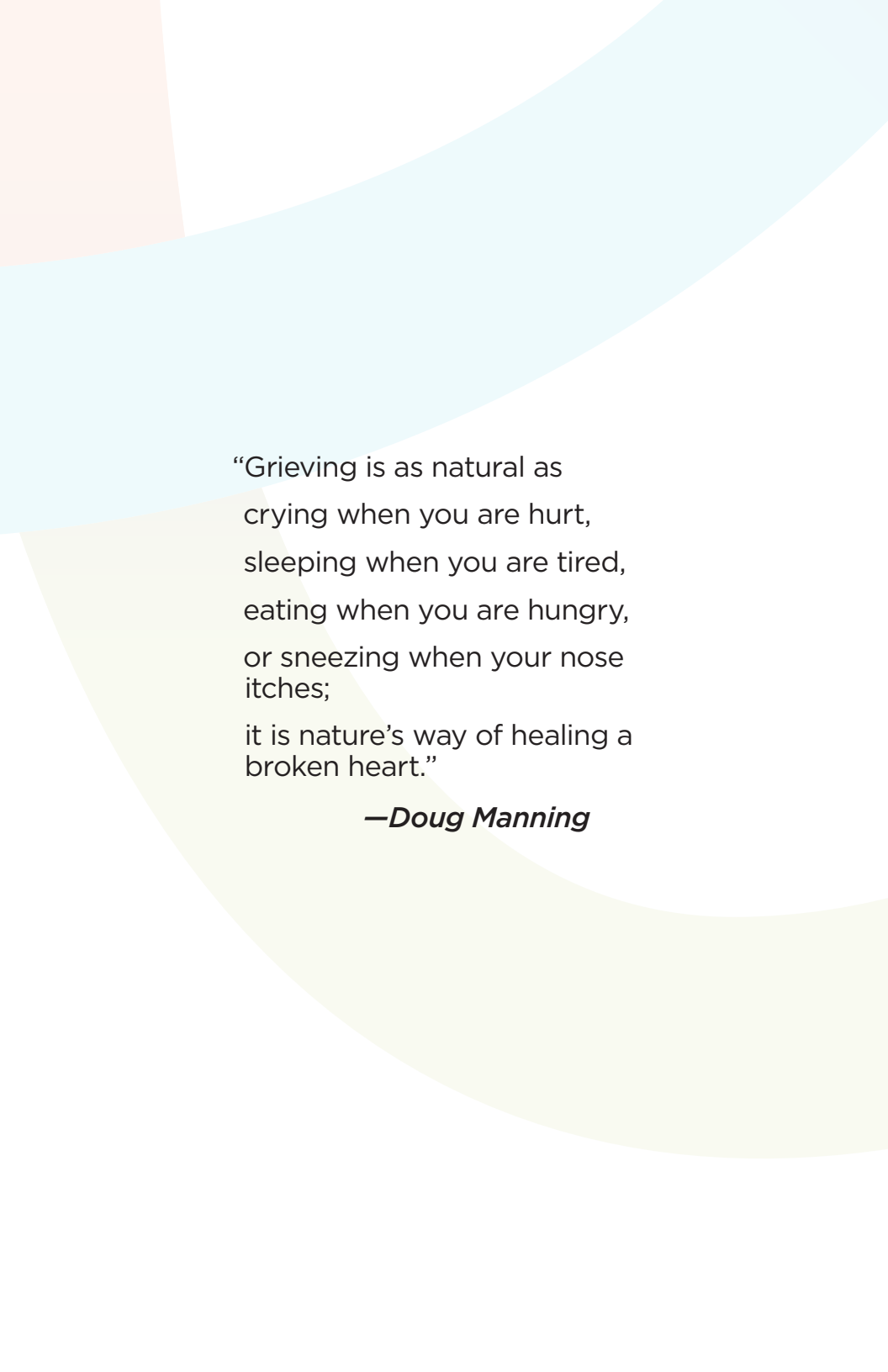


Coping with Grief and Loss

a Handbook
for Survivors





“Grieving is as natural as
crying when you are hurt,
sleeping when you are tired,
eating when you are hungry,
or sneezing when your nose
itches;
it is nature’s way of healing a
broken heart.”

—Doug Manning

CONTENTS

Surviving Your Loss.....	4
Common and Normal Responses to Loss	7
Secondary Loss.....	9
Phases of Grief.....	9
First and Second Year Expectations	13
Coping Techniques.....	16
Moving Toward Healing.....	20
Hope for the Future.....	20
Grief and Loss Resources	22

SURVIVING YOUR LOSS

One of the most devastating things that can happen to a person is the death of a loved one. This booklet will offer guidance about what to expect from the grieving process and how to heal from your loss.

The first section of this book is about surviving the early days of a loss. Think of it as a “First Aid” kit of information that will help you deal with the stress of grieving.

HANDLING STRESS

Times of emotional upheaval are always stressful. You may be worn out from months or years of being the primary caregiver for a loved one during a long illness. Or, you may be utterly stunned by the news of a sudden death.

You may feel overwhelmed by the many practical aspects of a loss (planning of a memorial service, visits from friends and family, financial matters, estate decisions, etc.) Whatever the case, this is a time in your life when it’s very important to take care of yourself.

Think of your body as a trusted car that has carried you through your life so far. Normally your car is well-maintained; it has a full tank of gas, and runs well. But the shock and devastation of losing someone can suck your fuel tank dry and leave you empty, tired, and vulnerable. The danger is that you may not notice that you are feeling “run down” until you “break down.”

The following are some of the ways you can minimize the effects of stress on your body and maintain your health.

MAINTAIN HEALTHY EATING HABITS

While grieving, it is not unusual to experience disturbances in your appetite. Some people lose their appetite entirely while others experience an increase in appetite or have cravings, especially for “comfort” foods. It is best to choose foods that will provide your body with balanced nutrition.

Research has proven that when you are under stress, your immune system is more susceptible to illness. You may not feel like cooking, but healthy meals can help maintain both your immune system and your daily energy levels. They can also help stabilize your moods and emotions.

Some health experts recommend eating five to six small meals a day to keep energy levels even. Foods high in potassium, calcium, and protein can help decrease the effects of stress on the body. You may also want to ask your physician about vitamin supplements such as B-12. Avoid foods that have empty calories. Junk foods and comfort foods may fill an emotional void, but the effect is often short-lived.

SLEEP WELL

During a period of deep sadness, people often find that their sleep patterns change and sleeping becomes difficult. This is a normal response to loss and usually only lasts a short time.

If you are having trouble sleeping, try creating a routine that you can repeat every night. Go to bed at the same time every night and wake up at the same time every morning. Experts say that ignoring the alarm clock, even on weekends, can upset the body's sleep rhythms all week long.

Avoid alcohol. Even if you find it "relaxing," it can still disturb your sleep. It may make you feel tired, but it often reduces the quality and length of your sleep. You might find yourself waking in the middle of the night as the effects wear off.

Caffeine and tobacco also interfere with sleep. Be aware of foods that contain caffeine, such as tea, coffee, chocolate, and many soft drinks.

If sleep disturbances continue for more than a few weeks, you may want to consult your physician. Do not take any over-the-counter sleep aids without also consulting your physician.

GET EXERCISE

One of the best ways to relieve tension and elevate your outlook on life is to engage in moderate physical activity. The activity does not have to be strenuous to have benefits; it only needs to be moderate and regular.

A simple daily walk can improve your mood and increase your overall well-being. Asking a friend or neighbor to be a "walking buddy" will provide the added benefit of having someone to talk to and share your feelings with. If a friend or neighbor is not available, consider joining a health club, but be careful to choose programs and facilities that are appropriate for your age and needs. Remember to check with your physician before beginning any exercise program.

COMMUNICATE WITH OTHERS

In spite of their best efforts, family members and friends may not know exactly how to help you. They may become too involved or not involved enough. In their haste to help, they may say or do things that are unhelpful. Remember that they are hurting and trying their best too. As you become aware of your needs, it is important to graciously let others know what you appreciate and how they can help.

In the early stages of loss, you may feel overwhelmed and have trouble identifying your needs. If this happens, you may find it helpful to have some quiet time alone to organize your thoughts. If you need rest, you may want to ask a trusted individual to check on you and be a spokesperson for you. It is ok to delegate tasks and allow others to help you through this time.

PRACTICE TO RELAXATION

You probably already know some relaxation techniques that you have forgotten about. Think of stressful situations you've had in your past and how you handled them. Is there a place that makes you feel safe or relaxed? Is there a person whose company you find soothing? Is there an activity that makes you feel calm?

Try to identify activities that are comforting to you and allow yourself to do those things. They can be as simple as talking to a friend, writing, praying, singing, or listening to music. Other soothing activities are: taking nature walks, treating yourself to a massage, or taking a long bath.

Even if you find activities that relieve stress, there may be times that you feel gripped by tension and tight muscles. There are specific relaxation techniques you can learn to help your body relax. One such exercise involves tightening and releasing individual muscle groups. You can do this sitting in a comfortable chair, or lying in bed before you go to sleep. Start at your head or your feet and think about each muscle in your body, one at a time. As you think about each specific muscle, tighten that muscle, then release it.

Sometimes when people are stressed, they have panic attacks. During an attack, your muscles will tense up and your heart will beat faster. Your brain may have trouble getting oxygen, which will make you want to breath faster, which will cause even more panic and anxiety. If you feel this way, try taking slower breaths. Place your hand over your diaphragm and feel it expand as you take in air through your nose. Then feel your hand move inward with your stomach as the air is exhaled out. Continue this exercise until your breathing becomes deep and regular.

BE KIND TO YOURSELF

Grief can impact your emotions in many ways. It can cause fluctuations in your moods that you are not used to, causing feelings of depression.

The following is a list of ways to help yourself through feelings of emotional distress:

- Maintain a healthy lifestyle by eating nutritionally balanced meals, exercising regularly, and nurturing regular sleeping routines.
- Set small, achievable goals. For example, each day you can set one goal. Then, as you begin to feel stronger and have more energy, you can add more goals to your list. Don't feel bad if you seem to make progress on some days and not on others.
- Praise yourself often. Even if there are days when your main accomplishment is getting out of bed and doing a few household chores, you will be successfully overcoming feelings of emotional upheaval.

COMMON AND NORMAL RESPONSES TO A LOSS

Although grief is a universal experience, it is a very personal journey. Everyone grieves in their own way and in their own time.

You may experience a wide range of different emotions or a small set of recurring emotions. They may be intense and surprise you. Or, you may feel so numb that your lack of emotion surprises you. These are all normal experiences.

What you may not know is that the overwhelming shock of loss can affect more than your emotions. It can affect your entire being and your ability to function well. You might be unable to concentrate on simple tasks. Your brain might feel “fuzzy” or “overloaded.” You might feel confused. Or you might feel an overwhelming need to sleep every few hours, as if just being conscious is hard work.

You might feel physically sick—nauseated, dizzy or physically exhausted. Your emotions can be so strong that they manifest as physical sensations: a weight on your chest that makes it hard to breathe; a feverish feeling as if the pain of your emotions is burning through you; a brittle feeling as if suddenly you are made of glass or air or nothing at all; or a stunned feeling as if someone has just hit you with a large, heavy object. Again, these are normal experiences and they will pass.

Following is a list of common mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual effects of loss that you might experience:

COMMON MENTAL RESPONSES:

Difficulty concentrating	Sense of unreality
Inability to make decisions	Confusion
Disorganization	Short term memory loss
Inability to think clearly	Disturbing dreams

COMMON EMOTIONAL RESPONSES:

Anger	Despair
Sadness	Guilt
Hopelessness	Relief
Panic	Loneliness
Helplessness	Bitterness
Anxiety	Depression
Withdrawing	Numbness
Emptiness	Shock

COMMON PHYSICAL RESPONSES:

Crying	Fatigue
Dizziness	Fluctuations in appetite
Numbness	Weight loss or gain
Headaches	Constipation or Diarrhea
Nausea	Decreased resistance to illness
Shortness of breath	Blurred vision
Exhaustion	Insomnia

COMMON SPIRITUAL RESPONSES:

Re-evaluation of beliefs	Sense of closeness to God
Sense of distance from God	Heightened awareness of God
Anger at God or spiritual power	Feelings of spiritual grace
Difficulty attending place of worship	Heightened awareness of one's own mortality

SECONDARY LOSSES

Your primary loss is the death of your loved one. Secondary losses are other important losses that accompany the death of your loved one. They are often less obvious or recognizable, but secondary losses may be very important to your life.

Examples of secondary losses might include:

- Loss of Income or Financial Security
- Loss of Living Environment
- Loss of Support System
- Loss of Confidence
- Loss of Identity
- Loss of a Meaningful Role
- Loss of Faith
- Loss of Dreams for the Future

As you progress through your grief, you may notice that secondary losses have a significant impact on your life. Acknowledging the impact of a secondary loss is a healthy component of the grieving process. It is important to utilize healthy coping skills and draw upon available supports to help you manage your secondary losses.

PHASES OF GRIEF

There are many theories about the emotional journey that a person takes as they struggle with loss. You may have already heard the phrase “Stages of Grief.” Recently, the “stages” of grief have come to be referred to as the “phases” of grief, because a person rarely experiences each phase in a neat, orderly sequence.

For example, it is not uncommon to repeat certain stages, or to skip a stage entirely. As you travel through grief, you may feel that you are taking “two steps forward and one step back.” Or, you may feel that you are doing a frustrating sideways dance, moving through similar phases without making visible progress.

You may feel stranded in a phase. Or, you may feel that you have passed through a phase too quickly and you are waiting for the “other shoe to drop.” Remember, each person’s grief journey is different. It is important not to feel pressure, from yourself or from well-meaning family and friends, to hurry through your grief.

Also, don’t let anyone tell you what to feel or when to feel it. At some point in your journey, as the initial disorientation and shock wear off, you will develop instincts and intuition about how to help yourself heal.

The following is an outline of the Phases of Grief. Remember, this is only a guide; your grief experience will be unique.

SHOCK/NUMBNESS/DISBELIEF PHASE

This is an initial phase that often occurs immediately after the death. At the moment of death, there may be a feeling of shock, numbness, disbelief, or disorganization. In spite of evidence, you may have trouble believing that your loved one has just taken their last breath. If you are present with your loved one at the time of death, it may be helpful to sit with the body for a few moments until you feel ready to leave.

Some people describe a prolonged feeling disbelief for weeks after the funeral. For example, when seeing someone who resembles their loved one, they may momentarily think it actually is that person. This is normal, especially if you were providing care for a long time. When your brain has been wired to attend to someone continuously, it takes time for you to adjust your thinking and come to terms with the fact that they are no longer living. Be patient with yourself and reassure yourself that this is normal.

You may find that you are on “autopilot” in the weeks following the death. The family is usually making arrangements for the funeral or memorial service. Friends may be visiting and bringing food or flowers, and family may be arriving from out-of-town for the service. When you reflect on this time later, it may be hard to remember details. Strangely, this phase may be a blessing because it allows the griever to experience the pain in increments. It protects you from feeling all of your emotions at once, which could be overwhelming.

The length of this phase will depend on many factors. One factor is the manner of death. A sudden, unexpected loss may cause a longer, more intense experience of this phase. But even if the death was expected due to illness, there is always a sense of immediate shock that often feels like a physical blow.

TELLING-MY-STORY PHASE

This phase is characterized by the need to tell and retell the story of your loved one’s life and death.

You might need to share the details of the death—the diagnosis of an illness, the care-giving, the specifics of an accident, the medical response, the moment of death. You might need to talk about the funeral or memorial service. Or, you may need to tell and retell stories about your life together—cherished memories, watershed events, resolved and unresolved issues, everyday rituals, struggles, triumphs, and good times. You may need to tell these stories many, many times.

Telling the story is a way that helps many people feel they have found a way

to bring honor to the one they loved so much. Also, in the repeated telling of the story, the reality of the death is established in small increments so our hearts and minds can begin to deal with what has happened in our lives.

It is important to find supportive people who will listen to your story as many times as you need to tell it. It is only when you feel you have been heard and understood that you come to the place where you are ready for the next step in your journey. A support group can provide a safe, healthy environment for this.

REALITY PHASE

This phase is when the loss begins to feel real. You realize that your loved one is not coming home. This phase can also happen in increments. Your mind may reach this phase before your heart does.

You might experience an emotional onslaught during this phase, and/or an emotional release. You might cry or wail. This is when the deep, intense grief begins.

You may experience a phase where your painful emotions are so overwhelming that they seem to take over your life. Common painful emotions are anger, guilt, and depression.

You may also find yourself withdrawing from your friends, co-workers and family. Or from activities that, before the death, provided you with a sense of purpose or feelings of joy, but after the death, feel empty or painful.

- **Anger:** You may feel angry at God, members of the medical community who cared for your loved one, friends, family or yourself. Anger is a normal part of grief and needs to be expressed. Talking or writing about it can help.
- **Guilt:** You may feel guilty for things you said or things you didn't say. You may feel guilty about something you did or didn't do. It is important to separate legitimate guilt from "survivor guilt," a frequent phenomenon which causes survivors to feel guilty for no real reason except that they are alive and their loved one is not. If you are having trouble with feelings of guilt, talk to someone that you trust about them.
- **Sadness:** You may find that your sadness feels like a constant companion, draining you of energy and making you feel listless or apathetic. Life may feel muted and distant, and you may feel like a heaviness has moved into your body and made even simple movements difficult. You may cry at unexpected times and lose interest in your usual activities. This is a normal reaction to loss and usually lifts as you move along your grief path. However, if your sadness worsens, it could become clinical depression, at which point you should see a doctor. Suicidal thoughts are a red flag and, if you have these, you should talk to someone you trust—a friend, counselor, minister or healthcare professional—immediately. The National Suicide Hotline is 800-273-8255.

- **Withdrawal:** You may not want to be around big groups of people. It may be hard to accept dinner or lunch invitations. This might be because you are afraid of having a “grief burst,” (a sudden bout of crying or sadness), or because it is too draining to try to “act normal” at a social event. This is common. It is important to have some time alone to think about your loss and process it. Give yourself time and space. However, it is also important that you don’t isolate yourself, as that can worsen feelings of depression and loneliness. Seek out friends who will spend quiet time just being with you no matter what you are feeling, or who will help you turn a grief burst into a cleansing experience of crying and/or laughing.
- **Anxiety:** You may feel anxious about the changes in your life. You may not know who you are without your loved one or what your new role and responsibilities will be. This is normal. It can help to talk with friends about your fears or to ask for help planning out your new responsibilities.

REINVESTMENT/ADJUSTMENT PHASE

This is the phase when you begin to experience moments of joy and happiness again. You slowly begin to care about things again, and you are no longer just “going through the motions.” You may not even realize that you are in this phase at first, because healing is a gradual process.

Relationships and activities that you enjoyed before the loss may not fulfill you in the same way, so, in this phase, you begin to invest yourself in new activities and endeavors. You will find that you want to engage in life again. You will feel that your hope is renewed.

However, adjusting to loss is a life-long journey and you might experience this phase in cycles throughout your life. It might be frustrating to feel yourself going “backwards” into an earlier, more difficult phase, but once you have had the realization that you want to invest yourself in a new life — that you are ready to put the effort in — it will be a powerful turning point.

FIRST AND SECOND YEAR EXPECTATIONS

The following is an outline of how the first and second year may unfold.

MONTH ONE

The first month is usually when the Shock and Numbness Phase occurs. You are likely planning the memorial service, but nothing feels very real and you are going on autopilot.

MONTHS TWO TO THREE

This is usually when the Reality Phase sets in. Relatives and friends return to their normal routines. You may feel lost if your normal routine has been disrupted. The full impact of the loss on the many areas of your life may become apparent. This is a critical time and you shouldn't be afraid to reach out for help and guidance.

MONTHS FOUR TO SIX

This phase can be challenging. There may be some good days during this time, but there also may be some outbursts as events in your life trigger strong feelings. Your emotions will probably be on a roller coaster. As the sixth month approaches, your grief may become more intense and you may feel that you are slipping backwards. Bereaved persons are often surprised to experience this “relapse” around month six, because it is difficult to realize that so much time has passed. Also, there has likely been a “first” of some kind since the death — a first birthday, holiday, or anniversary — without the loved one. Strong feelings may surface in this phase as you realize that your life is not going to return to the place it was before your loved one died.

MONTHS SEVEN TO TWELVE

There will hopefully be more good days than bad in this phase. There will still be difficult times and your emotions may still surprise you, but you will begin to feel moments of joy and hope. As you approach the one-year anniversary of your loved one's death, you may find yourself reliving the last days and weeks of their life.

This may be a very difficult time, bringing back a resurgence of thoughts and feelings you may not have expected. Some people have expressed that the eleventh month is when they begin to experience their most difficult moments in anticipation of the first anniversary and have been surprised that the actual day was not as bad as they had expected. It is just important that you are aware that this may again be a temporary time of great sadness as you continue your grief journey.

SIGNIFICANT ANNIVERSARIES:

The first year is full of many “firsts” — holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and other special days. Even after many years, you might find yourself feeling anxious, sad, angry or irritable for no reason that you can think of, until you look at a calendar and are reminded that you are near an anniversary. Sometimes, the intensity of your feelings will surprise you. Significant dates that you shared with your loved one may evoke powerful feelings in you for the rest of your life. But with the passage of time, hopefully the memories will become less painful and more treasured.

The following are some experiences that you might encounter in the first year of a grief journey:

- It is normal to feel crazy at times. Your emotions are on a roller coaster, full of ups and downs. Your mind is on overload. Grief seems to come in waves. You may be crying one minute, laughing the next, screaming and filled with anger the next. Everything seems to be spinning out of control.
- Other people often think they are an expert when it comes to grief. People will tell you what you need, how you should feel, how you should grieve and what you need to do. It is best to grieve in your own way.
- Each aspect of the loss will be grieved differently. Multiple losses in a short time will also be grieved differently and may complicate or prolong the grief process.
- Family members are not always able to comfort each other because they are grieving a different loss. Grief can bring a family together or tear it apart. Your relationships may be strengthened or weakened.
- The intensity of grief will depend on many factors — the type of relationship, the circumstances of the death, etc.
- Grief changes you and your life. You will not be the same person after the loss that you were before. Many people are not prepared for the depth of these changes.
- You may want to just “get back to normal,” but that old normal is no longer there. You will have to develop a “new normal.” You might find yourself grieving the end of a lifestyle, the end of shared activities, the end of family traditions, or of your role. Whole aspects of your life may be lost, not just your loved one.
- Grief may affect you physically. You may be more susceptible to colds or infections. If you have been a caregiver for a long time, you may have neglected your own well-being while caring for your loved one. It is a good idea to get a physical exam from your doctor and to focus on your own health.

- You may experience a spiritual crisis during your grief journey. People may either turn to God or ignore their spiritual needs in moments of great sorrow. It is a common and understandable reaction to be angry with God and to question why this event has come into your life. Talking to a minister, faith community leader or spiritual counselor may help with these feelings.
- Some people will be uncertain what to say to you and may be uncomfortable around you. They don't want to cause you more pain. They may say things that they do not realize are hurtful. Recognize their efforts and surround yourself with those who understand what it is like to suffer a loss.
- There may be times when you just need to "take a break" from your grief. Give yourself permission to enjoy life. You do not have to feel guilty if you laugh or enjoy yourself. In fact, the first time you laugh after a loss may surprise you and will probably bring you a feeling of relief.

THE SECOND YEAR:

Many grieving persons are surprised when they experience difficult times after the one-year anniversary of the death. The second year may be even more difficult than the first. Or, it may be better. Remember that your grief will be as unique as you are, and as unique as the person you have lost. There is no concrete pattern or timetable to follow, no single right way to grieve. Grief takes as long as it takes and that is different for each of us.

COPING TECHNIQUES

For many months you may be asking yourself: “How can I handle this loss?” While there is no cure for the pain, there are techniques you can learn to help yourself move through the pain and toward healing.

Talk with others about your feelings. This process can be repeated as often as necessary. Don't let your feelings get bottled up inside you. Sharing your pain and confusion, and sharing memories of your loved one can help you heal.

Find other ways to express your feelings. A friend may not always be available to listen, but there are alternatives such as keeping a journal, writing a letter to your loved one, or going to a support group. If you need a physical release, you can cry, exercise, or hit a pillow.

Give yourself permission to really “feel” whatever you are feeling. Remember, feelings aren't “right” or “wrong,” they just are. They are automatic responses to something that has happened to us or in our world. It is important to learn how to express these feelings in ways that get them out of your body without doing harm to yourself or others. It is a good thing to express anger, sadness, frustration—even joy! It is okay to cry, and it is okay to laugh.

Take care of you. Get plenty of rest, eat nutritious meals, exercise regularly, get a physical from your doctor, and allow yourself time to do comforting activities.

Establish a support network. Determine who the supportive people are in your life. It's okay to avoid the people in your life who are not supportive, who may drain your energy, or who bring you down.

Draw on your spiritual strength. Whatever is your source of comfort and strength — utilize it to the fullest. Prayer, meditation, discussions with spiritual leaders, and fellowship with others in your faith community can all be helpful.

Try not to make major decisions. Because grieving can cloud your judgment, it is best to wait six months to a year after your loss to make major decisions. If you must make major decisions, seek the counsel of a trusted individual in your life who can help you make wise choices. Don't let anyone pressure you into hurrying through a major decision.

Educate yourself on the grieving process. Use the resources provided by Covenant Care Bereavement Services. Also, seek out workshops, support groups, magazines, and books about grief.

Seek guidance. If you know someone who has experienced a similar loss and who has healed enough to be able to offer guidance, you might want to seek them out and talk with them.

Honor your loved one. Find a comforting way to honor the memory of your loved one. Here are some suggestions:

- Make donations to a charity in their name
- Make a scrapbook or shadowbox to hold special mementos
- Light a candle on special occasions in their memory
- Plant a tree or create a memory garden
- Create a table or place with pictures and mementos of your life together
- At a holiday dinner, set a special place setting
- On special occasions, offer a toast to your loved one in remembrance and thanksgiving

Avoid self-medicating. Do not use alcohol or drugs (legal or illegal) to numb your pain. When the numbness wears off, the grief will still be there. In fact, your life may be worse than when you began self medicating, because drug and alcohol abuse endanger your health, your friendships, your job, etc.

When you're ready, help others. Many bereaved persons find it healing to help others. You can volunteer for charitable organizations or simply help others on an individual basis. After a year has passed, you might want to consider volunteering with groups who work with grieving people such as Covenant Care Hospice.

Don't impose any "shoulds" on yourself. There is no specific time frame for the grief process. You don't have to be at a specific place at a specific time. Don't judge how you're grieving by looking at how someone else is grieving or has grieved. Be patient with yourself.

Believe that you will survive. Even though it seems impossible, you can make it through your grief journey step by step. Sometimes that will mean taking life day by day — and sometimes it will mean taking life minute by minute. Don't try and force your life into returning to "normal." You can't go backwards into the "old" normal, but you can look forward to finding a "new" normal.

Practice journaling. Every day most of us carry on an internal conversation with ourselves as we try to make sense of our lives. The process of "journaling" is simply writing down those thoughts and feelings so that they become tangible and clearer to us.

Journaling is a coping technique that can be used at any time in life, but it is especially helpful for handling the complicated and intense emotions of grief. What is great about a journal is that anyone can keep one. It doesn't require any special skills or training. It doesn't matter what kind of notebook you have, how much time you spend journaling or even if you can spell correctly.

Also, a journal is a safe place to express your feelings. You can write down anything — questions, longings, fears, or needs. This process can provide insight and relief.

Here are sample topics you may want to write about:

For clarification of thoughts and feelings, you can ask:

- Who am I at this point in my life?
- What am I doing and why? How do I feel about my life? What do I need to change in order to feel better about myself?

For reflection and remembering, you can write about:

- Special memories with my loved one.
- Things I don't want to forget.
- Favorite stories I want to pass down to children and others. A history of our lives together.

For a sense of completion, you can write about:

- What I wish I had or hadn't said.
- What I wish I had or hadn't done.
- What I'd like to ask you.
- What I miss most.
- How I felt when you died.
- How I feel now.
- What I wish we had or hadn't done together.
- What we can't do now.

Write letters. When someone dies, we almost always wish we had one more chance to say something to them. In addition to journaling, it can be helpful to write a letter addressed to your loved one. You can do anything you want with the finished letter — put it in a drawer, take it to the cemetery and bury it, burn it and scatter its ashes, or shred it.

You can also try this exercise: After you have written the letter, take a break — sit quietly and clear your mind, go for a walk, or do something else. Then, come back and try to imagine what your loved one's response to you might be. Don't think too hard, just start writing and let it flow. See if you can write a letter back to yourself.

You can use this same technique to clarify your spiritual beliefs, which are often confusing after a loss. You can write them down in your journal, or you can write a letter to God or higher power according to your beliefs. You can pour out your thoughts and feelings. You can follow that with the same

exercise as described above. Wait awhile after writing the letter, then try to imagine what a response from God would be like and write that down.

This exercise often works because we tend to have wisdom inside us that we don't know how to access. We are then able to write in a way that the thoughts and feelings flow of their own accord out of us, then we can find clues/messages — from our own internal wisdom.

Write down emotional dreams. While grieving, you may experience a change in your dream life. Dreams can cause many different types of feelings. You may feel comforted, confused, enlightened, or distressed.

It may be helpful for you to know that many theories about dreaming suggest that dreams are sent to us by our subconscious mind as a way to help up us understand ourselves. They are sent to us in the service of becoming whole.

Even frightening dreams may simply be reflecting how our emotional, inner self is doing beneath the surface. The reason they are frightening is because of the language they come in — that is, the language of our own personal subconscious mind — a language full of strange, exaggerated, bizarre, beautiful images, many from our own lives. But once you learn to decode your dream language, then the message itself is usually not so scary.

Writing down your dreams can help you clarify them. It can also help you shake off any bad feelings that the dream might have left you with upon waking. Writing down the dream — or talking about it — gets it out in the open. It takes the emotional echoes out of your body and releases them. Some people keep a pad of paper by the bed (and even a flashlight), because it is best to write them down when they are fresh.

Remember, as “unnatural” and painful and “wrong” as grief often feels, it is actually a very natural process. At some point in life, everyone suffers a loss. Many bereaved struggle with their own mortality after a death and this may bring up difficult emotions.

Nature has built-in ways of processing and healing the wounds to a human being's emotional, psychological, and spiritual self. As Doug Manning said, “Grieving is nature's way of healing a broken heart.” Let time, tears, dreams, and reflection do the work of mending you.

MOVING TOWARD HEALING

For many individuals, the death of a loved one may be one of the worst wounds imaginable. As you move toward healing, you will find that the emotional and spiritual processes are similar to the healing of a physical wound. For example, crying can be therapeutic and cleansing, as tears are a natural way of expressing and cleansing our psychological pain.

Over the course of healing, you will probably experience emotional ups and downs. Sometimes we feel like we are making strides, and then we will suddenly become discouraged again. Healing takes time and patience, and this unimaginable loss may offer an opportunity for you to practice self-care like never before. It is important to honor the process of your grief with patience and kindness.

Below is a list of signs that indicate that healing is occurring:

- You can talk about your loved one without the constant flow of tears.
- You begin to do some of the activities you did before your loved one died.
- You realize that you are laughing again without feeling guilty.
- You are eating and sleeping better and don't feel as tired all the time.
- You feel like you are coming back to life and things begin to matter again.
- You realize that you are living in the present instead of in the memories of your past.
- You don't think of your loved one constantly.
- You develop a new routine in your daily life (a "new normal").
- You are able to look forward to events in your future.

It has been said that eventually life breaks us all, but just as with a broken bone, when it is healed it is stronger at the broken place. You, too, can be stronger once you have done the work of grieving and healing.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

When the unspeakable — and at times unbearable — happens to us, we think that our lives will never be the same. And, that is correct. When someone you love dies, your life changes forever.

However, at some point, life begins to be meaningful and joyful again. You find that "new normal." But this new normal, this new life, is something you have to choose. Only you can choose if you are going to be a survivor or a victim.

You can choose to:

- Seek out people who will listen to you and who care about you OR you can isolate yourself and retreat from life.
- Look for things that give you a sense of meaning and purpose in life OR you can decide you have nothing to live for.
- Fight back against your negative feelings OR you can give in to feelings of helplessness and pity.
- Talk about your concerns with someone you trust OR you can keep them bottled up and festering.
- Make your life better OR make your life bitter.
- Embrace family and friends who are also hurting OR you can pretend you are protecting them by ignoring their pain.
- Be thankful for the years you were given with your loved one OR you can continue to be angry because you feel you were robbed.

The bereavement services of Covenant Care is available to help you reach a place in your grief journey where you will be able to cherish the gift of your loved one's life and find comfort in the memories that remain.

You can shed tears because they are gone,

Or you can smile because they lived.

You can close your eyes and pray they will come back,

Or you can open your eyes and see all that they left for you.

Your heart can be empty because you can't see them,

Or you can be full of the love you shared.

You can turn your back on tomorrow and live yesterday,

Or you can be happy for tomorrow because of yesterday.

You can remember only that they are gone,

Or you can cherish their memory and let it live on.

You can cry and close your mind and feel empty,

Or you can do what they would want:

Smile, Open your heart, Love ... and go on.

— Elizabeth Ammons

GRIEF AND LOSS RESOURCES

AMBIGUOUS LOSS

Boss, Pauline. **Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief.** Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. *Written for those who are suffering loss in the face of uncertainty, such as missing persons, dementia, and other unresolved circumstances.*

DEATH OF A CHILD

Cacciatore, Joanne. **Bearing the Unbearable: Love, Loss, and the Heartbreaking Path of Grief.** Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2017. *Written by a grief professional who has lived through the loss of an infant and other loved ones.*

Farley, Kelly and Dicola, David. **Grieving Dads.** Aurora, IL: Grieving Dads LLC, 2012. *A man writes about the experience of child loss from the perspective of a father.*

Meisenholder, Janice B. **Surviving the Unthinkable.** Wellesley, MA: MBM Publishers, 2017. *Discusses recovering from the loss of a child of any age.*

Mitchell, Ellen et al. **Beyond Tears: Living After Losing a Child.** New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009. *Revised edition written by nine mothers, each who have lost a child. This edition also includes a chapter on sibling loss.*

Roe, Gary. **Shattered: Surviving the Loss of a Child.** Wellborn, TX: Healing Resources Publishing, 2017. *A popular publication, part of a Good Grief series by this author.*

Zenoff, Nisha. **The Unspeakable Loss.** New York: Da Capo Press, 2017. *Written from the perspective of a mother who is reflecting on the days and years following a tragic and unexpected loss.*

DEATH OF A PARENT FOR ADULTS

Levy, Alexander. **The Orphaned Adult.** Cambridge, MA: Perseus Press, 2000. *Acknowledges the significance of loss of parents in adulthood, including shift in family roles and coming to terms with mortality.*

Marshall, Fiona. **Losing a Parent.** Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2000. *A practical guide to assist adults after losing a parent. Originally published in 1993, updated in 2000.*

Silverman, Phyllis and Kelly, Madelyn. **A Parent's Guide to Raising Grieving Children.** Oxford University Press, 2009. *A guide to explaining death and preparing children and teens for living with loss.*

DEATH OF A SPOUSE

Colby, Fred. **Widower to Widower: Surviving the End of Your Most Important Relationship.** Fort Collins, CO: Front Range Press, 2021. *This second edition is now on the National Widower's Organization website as a resource for men who are navigating the death of a spouse.*

Cooley, Eileen L. **Newly Widowed, Now Socially Awkward.** Atlanta: ELCooley Publishing, 2017. *A licensed psychologist reflects upon changes in her relationships following the death of her spouse.*

Didion, Joan. **The Year of Magical Thinking.** New York: Vintage Books, 2005. *An autobiographical account of the death of this famous writer's spouse and only daughter.*

Lewis, C.S. **A Grief Observed.** New York: Seabury Press, 1961. *An autobiographical account of the famous writer's journey through grief after his wife's death from illness.*

Neeld, Elizabeth H. **Seven Choices.** New York: Warner Books, 2003. *Offers guidance on adapting, especially for those who have lost a spouse.*

Raby, Lois M. **When Your Soul Aches.** Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2000. *Written by a widow for women and men who have lost a spouse.*

GENERAL GRIEF

Devine, Megan. **It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand.** Boulder, Co: Sounds True, 2017. *A popular treatise on the sociocultural aspects of grief, which normalizes the experience of people who are feeling misunderstood after a loss.*

Klein, Allen. **Embracing Life After Loss.** Coral Gables: Mango Publishing, 2019. *A gentle daily grief meditation.*

Kubler-Ross, Elizabeth and Kessler, David. **Life Lessons.** New York: Simon & Schuster, Revised 2014. *Two experts on death and dying teach us about life and living.*

Manning, Doug. **Don't Take My Grief Away From Me.** Oklahoma City, OK: Insight Books, Revised 2011. *How to walk through grief and learn to live again.*

Manning, Doug. **The Special Care Series.** Oklahoma City, OK: Insight Books, Revised 2005. *A series of four easy to read booklets that provide guidance through the first year of grief.*

Rando, Therese **A How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies.** Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1991. *Provides education on the grief process, normalizes grief reactions, and encourages readers to grieve in their own way.*

Roe, Gary. **Good Grief (Series of 8 books)**. Healing Resources Publishing. *Comforting words for those seeking a Christian perspective on different kinds of loss.*

Warner, Jan. **Grief Day by Day: Simple Practices and Daily Guidance for Living with Loss**. Emery, CA: Althea Press, 2018. *A sensitive daily reader that offers small portions of activities to assist through the grieving process.*

Wolfelt, Alan. **Healing Your Grieving Heart (Series of 24 books)**. Ft. Collins, CO: Companion Press. *This sensitive, professional author has written and taught extensively on grief and healing for adults and children across different situations.*

Wolfelt, Alan. **Understanding Your Grief**. Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press, Revised 2021. *Describes 10 “touchstones” to guide you in your grief journey.*

Wolfelt, Alan. **Understanding Your Grief Journal**. Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press, Revised 2021. *A journal that helps readers to explore the 10 “touchstones” of their own grief journey.*

Wray, T.J. and Price, Ann B. **Grief Dreams: How They Help Us Heal After the Death of a Loved One**. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005. *The authors guide readers in ways to understand and value their dreams, how to keep a grief dream journal, and how to use dreams as tools for healing and consolation.*

MASCULINE GRIEF

Golden, Thomas R. **Swallowed by a Snake**. Gaithersburg, MD: Golden Healing Publishing LLC, Second ed. 2000. *Identifies differences in the masculine side of healing.*

Levang, Elizabeth. **When Men Grieve**. Minneapolis, MN: Fairview Press, 1998. *Provides personal stories and explores aspects of loss from the male perspective.*

PARENTING — FOR ADULTS WITH GRIEVING CHILDREN AND TEENS

Gootman, Marilyn E. **When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving & Healing**. Minneapolis, MN: Spirit Publishing, 2019. *An updated version of a classic resource for ages 11 and up.*

Horsley, Gloria and Horsley, Heidi **Teen Grief Relief: Parenting with Understanding, Support, and Guidance**. Highland City, FL: Rainbow Books, 2007. *A self-help book for grieving teenagers and their parents, written by credentialed, mother/daughter, grief experts.*

Hughes, Lynne. **You Are Not Alone: Teens Talk About Life After the Loss of a Parent**. Scholastic Press, 2005. *A resource for 12 years and up.*

Karst, Patrice. **The Invisible String.** New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2018. *A highly regarded children's book about death, offering hope and encouragement.*

Lambert-Prater, Tracy. **Why Do I Feel So Sad?: A Grief Book for Children.** Rockridge Press, 2020. *An illustrated book to help children understand their feelings and to also have hope.*

Wolfelt, Alan. **Finding the Words: How to Talk with Children and Teens about Death, Suicide, Homicide, Funerals, Cremation, and other End-of-Life Matters.** Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press, 2013. *A compassionate book that offers guidance to help adults talk with children and teens about sensitive matters involving death.*

PET LOSS

Tillman, Barbara. **The Heaven of Animals.** New York: Fiewel & Friends, 2014. *A comforting account of beloved pets who experience death.*

Wolfelt, Alan. **When Your Pet Dies.** Fort Collins, CO: Companion Press, 2004. *Part of a companion series by grief by a well-known grief professional. This publication highlights ways to acknowledge and mourn the loss of a beloved animal friend.*

PERINATAL & INFANT LOSS FOR ADULTS

Cox, Franchesca. **Celebrating Pregnancy Again: Restoring The Lost Joys of Pregnancy After the Loss of a Child.** 2013. *Addresses the mix of feelings around grieving a lost child while experiencing another pregnancy.*

Kebelbeck, Amy. **Gift of Time.** Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. *Practical guide for parents who decide to continue a pregnancy knowing their baby's life will be brief.*

Kohn, Ingrid and Perry-Lynn Moffit. **A Silent Sorrow: Pregnancy Loss, Guidance and Support for You and Your Family.** Published by Routledge, 2000. *Offers practical suggestions for newly bereaved parents and their families.*

SIBLING LOSS FOR ADULTS

Jernigan, Janice. **Opening Up to Grief: A Surviving Sibling's Journey with Loss and Love.** Green Heart Living Press, 2022.

De Souse, Magdaline. **The Forgotten Mourners: Sibling Survivors of Suicide.** Outskirts Press, 2012.

SUICIDE AND TRAUMATIC LOSS

Armstrong, Courtney. **Transforming Traumatic Grief.** Artemecia Press, 2011. *Practical actions to heal and transform grief after a violent loss.*

Lesoine, Robert. **Unfinished Conversation: Healing from Suicide and Loss.** Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2013. *Recommended by many who have survived the loss of a loved one to suicide.*

Noel, Brook and Blair, Pamela. **I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye.** Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Inc., 2018. *A book endorsed by many who have suffered a sudden loss.*

Noel, Brook and Blair, Pamela. **I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye: A Companion Workbook.** Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Inc., 2008. *A workbook of therapeutic activities for those grieving the sudden loss of a loved one.*

O'Hara, Kathleen. **A Grief Like No Other: Surviving the Violent Death of Someone You Love.** New York: Marlowe & Company, 2006. *A therapist who has lost a son to murder shares her experience of moving through this harrowed journey.*

WEBSITES

[**www.allianceofhope.org**](http://www.allianceofhope.org) *For those who have lost a loved one to suicide.*

[**www.centerforloss.com**](http://www.centerforloss.com) *Articles, books, and available to bereaved persons and professionals led by Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D. A variety of losses are acknowledged, including divorce and other non-death related losses.*

[**www.centering.org**](http://www.centering.org) *A marketplace of bereavement books and materials addressing a range of losses.*

[**www.compassionatefriends.org**](http://www.compassionatefriends.org) *For anyone who has lost a child or sibling of any age. Chapters and support groups nationwide.*

[**www.garyroe.com**](http://www.garyroe.com) *A proficient Christian writer of a popular series of books on grief that addresses multiple age groups and types of losses.*

[**www.good-grief.org**](http://www.good-grief.org) *A blog addressing the questions that arise following a loss.*

[**www.nacg.org**](http://www.nacg.org) *National Alliance for Children's Grief website of materials for helping children and teens.*

[**www.nationalwidowers.org**](http://www.nationalwidowers.org) *A website for men who have lost a spouse.*

[**www.opentohope.com**](http://www.opentohope.com) *Articles, podcasts, books for people of all ages.*

[**www.pomc.org**](http://www.pomc.org) *Parents of Murdered Children. For anyone who has lost a child to violence. Chapters and support groups nationwide.*

[**www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org**](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org) *For anyone in the continental US who needs assistance. 24-hour suicide prevention hotline: 1-800-273-8255.*

[**www.whatsyourgrief.com**](http://www.whatsyourgrief.com) *Materials for professionals and anyone living with loss.*

[**www.widowconnection.com**](http://www.widowconnection.com) *A website for women who have lost a spouse.*



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Bereavement Services

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