PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# Coping With the Death of a Loved One

This information explains the grieving process and suggests ways to take care of yourself after the death of a loved one. We hope it’s helpful to you and your family.

## The Grieving Process

Grief is a normal response to loss. There are psychological (mental), emotional, and physical effects of grief.

After the death of a loved one, you may feel shock or disbelief. Some people feel numb or as if they’re in a dream. There may be times when you’re overwhelmed with sadness, emptiness, or loneliness. You may even feel anger, guilt, or relief. Having multiple feelings at the same time is normal.

Grief may also come with physical side effects, including changes in your appetite, weight, or sleeping habits. You may get headaches or stomachaches. You may also find it hard to think about going back to your daily routine or returning to work. Some days you may have more energy than others. Remember, there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Each person grieves in their own way.

Your grief may feel most painful in the first few months after your loss, but it often changes as the months go by. Some people may tell you that it takes a year to grieve the loss of a loved one. In truth, there is no set amount of time for grieving. Because your relationship with your loved one was one of a kind, your grief may be different than other people’s grief.

# Ways to Cope After the Death of a Loved One

Here are some things to keep in mind as you approach the days to come.

## Honoring your loved one

Different cultures and faiths have rituals to honor someone after they have died. Sometimes families create their own rituals, like lighting candles or getting together for a special meal. You may want to honor your loved one in a private way that is meaningful to you. You may also want to honor your loved one in a more public way. Examples are an online memorial, a plaque named in their memory, or the planting of a tree or garden. These efforts can help you create a sense of community and connection. You may want to talk with your spiritual counselor, friends, and family about how you would like to honor your loved one. Whatever choices you make, remember that there is no right or wrong way to honor a loved one’s memory.

## What to do with personal belongings

Your loved one’s clothing and personal items may have special meaning to you. Some people have a strong need to clean out closets and shelves soon after the death of their loved one. Other people keep things exactly as they were before their loss. You may find comfort in wearing a piece of clothing or reading a book that belonged to your loved one. You may also decide to share these belongings with family and friends. These decisions are yours to make. Take your time making them and do what feels most comfortable for you and your family.

## Interacting with family and friends

Family and friends can be a great source of support during this time. However, they’ll have their own feelings and reactions to your loved one’s death and to your grief. Some people do not know what to say to a grieving person. They may say something insensitive or rude when they try. Your needs may not always be clear to your partner, family, or friends. Because of this, it can be helpful to communicate what you need, even when it feels hard to do so. If you’re not ready to talk, you may feel more comfortable

writing an email or sending a text. You can also ask a friend or family member to help you communicate with others during this time.

## Making decisions

You may find it hard to make decisions right now. As a result, you may want to consider delaying any major decisions until months or a year after your loss. This includes moving, starting a new job, and managing your finances. It may be helpful to get advice from your friends and family when the time comes to make these decisions.

## Holidays and anniversaries

There will be milestones, like anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays, that remind you of your loss. Experiencing these days for the first time without your loved one can be hard. Planning ahead can make them a little easier to manage.

You may want to recognize these days differently this year. Revisiting family traditions, or making new ones, is one way you can do that. You may find comfort in spending time with friends and family, or you may choose to do something by yourself. Whatever choices you make, remember that there is no right or wrong way to respond to these particular days. Try to do what feels most comfortable for you.

## Helping your children cope with loss

Children of all ages will be affected by the death of someone close to them. If you have children who are grieving, you may want to protect them from the sadness that you're feeling. Still, it's important to acknowledge what has happened and recognize that all children will feel the loss in their own way.

The way your children grieve depends on their age, understanding of death, and the examples set by those around them. It's important to speak honestly about what has happened using age appropriate language. Phrases like "no longer with us" or "passed away" can be confusing to young children. Children may deal with their grief in different ways and at different times. Be honest with your children and answer their questions. This can help them feel loved, secure, and included as you work together to find a "new

normal.”

If you’re having trouble talking to your children, ask a family member, friend, or professional counselor to help you with this. Your social worker at Memorial Sloan Kettering (MSK) can give you more information on supportive services for you and your family.

# Caring for Yourself

Grief can cause mental, physical, and emotional stress. It’s important to pay attention to your own needs. Taking care of yourself during this time may not be your first priority. You may be focused on caring for others in your family. You may even feel guilty about caring for yourself. Giving yourself permission and time for self-care can help you cope with your loss.

Here are some ways you can care for yourself as you grieve.

## Make time for yourself

We all have different ways of caring for ourselves. For some people, physical activity, such as taking a walk or exercising, is helpful. Other people may prefer being with friends and family, sharing a meal, or talking. You may want to learn new skills, such as cooking or gardening. Making time to practice ways of finding comfort, pleasure, and meaning can help you as you grieve.

## Create a support system

Grieving alone can be very hard. Creating a support system for you and your family is important. This can include:

- Spending time with friends and family.
- Joining a support group.
- Seeking out professional counseling.
- Volunteering or taking part in community events.

Make sure to maintain open communication with people who support you.

Talking with them about your experience can help you stay connected as you grieve.

## Recognize when you need professional help

Some people can feel stuck in their grief, where their feelings either do not change or get more intense over time. If you feel this way 6 months or more after your loved one’s death, you may want to consider getting more support.

Some signs that you may need professional help are:

- You’re experiencing deep sadness and feeling that life holds no meaning.
- You’ve lost interest or pleasure in things you used to enjoy.
- You’re avoiding social activities.
- You’re having trouble making decisions or solving everyday problems.
- You’re not able to care for yourself, your children, or both.
- You’re having trouble sleeping, eating, or both.
- You’re feeling a lot of guilt, regret, or anger.
- You’re engaging in harmful behaviors, such as abusing alcohol or drugs.
- You have thoughts of suicide or of hurting yourself.

There are many types of counselors at MSK that can help you. These include social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, spiritual counselors, mental health counselors, and art and music therapists. A counselor can help you cope with how different your life feels now while caring for yourself, your family, and your daily affairs.

We cannot stop death from happening, but with time, patience, and support, we can learn how to live with the loss. Most importantly, we can find ways to engage with and find meaning in life again.

# Resources

MSK offers a range of resources for grieving families and friends. You can learn more about the following resources at www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/counseling-support/support-grieving-family-friends

To learn about bereavement services at MSK, ask your healthcare provider or contact the Department of Social Work's Bereavement Program. Call 646-888-4889 or email bereavement@mskcc.org.

**Department of Social Work's Bereavement Program**
646-888-4889
bereavement@mskcc.org
Our Department of Social Work's bereavement program offers free telephone consultations, support groups, educational lectures, and referrals to community resources. Oncology (cancer care) social workers have expertise in the psychological, social, and spiritual factors that impact those who are experiencing loss. They can also help with practical concerns that come up for individuals, families, and friends who are grieving.

**MSK Counseling Center**
646-888-0100
Some grieving families find counseling helpful. Our psychiatrists and psychologists lead a bereavement clinic that provides counseling and support to individuals, couples, and families who are grieving. They can also prescribe medications to help if you feel depressed.

**Spiritual Care**
212-639-5982
Our chaplains are available to listen, help support family members, pray, and contact community clergy or faith groups. They're also available to simply be a comforting person and a spiritual presence. Anyone can request spiritual support, no matter what religion you practice.

**Integrative Medicine Service**
646-449-1010

Our Integrative Medicine Service offers many therapies to complement (go along with) traditional medical care and emotional services. Some services include music therapy, mind and body therapies, dance and movement therapy, yoga, and touch therapy. People experiencing grief may find these services helpful when coping with the physical and emotional stresses that may come up.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your care team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5 p.m., during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Coping With the Death of a Loved One - Last updated on December 21, 2021
All rights owned and reserved by Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center