



PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Dealing with the Loss of a Loved One

This information gives suggestions on ways you can cope with the loss 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, 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 will change 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. Each loss is unique and we all deal with it in our own ways.

Coping with the Challenges of Losing 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. If you want to honor your loved one in a more public way, you can make an online memorial, purchase a plaque to be named in their memory, or plant a tree or garden. These efforts can help you create a sense of community and connection. You may want to talk with your clergy or friends and family about how you would like to honor your loved one.

What to do with personal belongings

Your loved one's clothing and personal items may have special meaning to you. Some people feel a strong need to clean out closets and shelves soon after the death of their loved one. Other people prefer to keep things exactly as they were before their loss. Some people may find comfort in wearing a piece of clothing or reading a book that belonged to the person who died. 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 will have their own feelings and reactions to your loved one's death. Some people don't know what to say to a grieving person and may say something insensitive when they try. Your needs may not always be obvious to your partner, family, or friends. It's important to try to communicate what you need and find ways to feel connected to others even when it feels hard to do so. If you're not ready to talk, you may feel more comfortable writing an email or text. You may also find it helpful to pick a friend or family member who can 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, such as moving, starting a new job, or rearranging your finances, until months or a year after your loss. When the time comes, or if you can't put them off, get advice from your friends and family to help you make these decisions.

Holidays and anniversaries

There will be milestones, like birthdays and holidays, that remind you of your loss. Experiencing these special days for the first time without your loved one can be hard. Planning ahead can make holidays 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 special 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 that are grieving with you, you may want to protect them from the sadness and confusion that you're feeling. Still, it's important to speak honestly about what has happened. All children will feel the loss in their own way.

The way your children grieve will depend 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. Being honest with your children and answering their questions 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 can give you more information on supportive services available to you and your family.

Caring for Yourself

Grief can cause 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 difficult. 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 participating in community events.

Maintaining open and ongoing communication with those who are able to support and talk with you about your experience can help you stay connected as you grieve.

Recognize when you need professional help

If your grief doesn't decrease or has gotten worse after 6 months or more, you may want to consider getting professional help. Some signs that you may need professional help are:

- You're experiencing deep sadness and feelings 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 difficulty 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 experiencing a lot of guilt 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 that can help you. These include social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, religious clergy, 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 can't avoid loss in our lives, but with time, patience, and support, we can move through it.

Resources

Memorial Sloan Kettering (MSK) offers a range of resources for grieving families and friends. You can learn more about the resources listed below at www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/counseling-support/support-grieving-family-friends

To learn about bereavement services at MSK, ask your doctor or call the Department of Social Work at 646-888-4889.

MSK Counseling Center

646-888-0200

Some bereaved 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.

Chaplaincy Services

212-639-5982

Our chaplains are available to listen, help support family members, pray, contact community clergy or faith groups, or to simply be a comforting person and a spiritual presence. Anyone can request spiritual support, regardless of formal religious affiliation.

Department of Social Work

646-888-4889

The 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, spiritual, and practical concerns that come up for individuals, families, and friends who are grieving.

Integrative Medicine Service

646-888-0800

Our Integrative Medicine Service offers many therapies to complement (go along with) traditional medical care and emotional services. Some services include music, mind/body, dance, movement and touch therapies and yoga, exercise, and meditation classes. People experiencing grief may find these services helpful when coping with the physical and emotional stresses that may come up. The Bendheim Integrative Medicine Center is located at 1429 First Avenue, East 74th Street.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

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

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