

# UNDERSTANDING GRIEF



National Alliance on Mental Illness

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**Mercer**

Serving the New Jersey Capital Area

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# AUTHORS NOTE

This toolkit was brought to you by NAMI Mercer and was created by Shivam Nangia, an intern at NAMI Mercer. The process of grief has always been a phenomenon that doesn't look identical for any one person; it can often be complicated, detrimental, frightening, and confusing. It is really different for everyone. No two individuals will respond, and process loss, the same. This toolkit's intention is to provide individuals with an understanding of grief, and coping strategies and resources to help with the process of grief.

# WHAT IS GRIEF?

The nature of the word, grief, is a word that cannot be exactly described what it is; grief is a normal universal response, yet so disparate for each individual. Keeping that in mind, grief is the response to a form of loss or change.



## **Speaking Grief | Understanding Grief: What is Grief?**

"Grief is not an illness or a mental health problem. Grief is a natural part of life." - Julie Kaplow

# TYPES OF LOSS

There are many types of loss that grief can entail. Grief can include, but is not solely limited to:

- Witnessing, or experiencing the death of someone or something who may or may not be closed to you.
  - *This may include a, family member, friends, spouse/partners, pets, child, lost pregnancy, or even a stranger.*
- The end of any form of relationship
  - *Including but not limited to, romantic, platonic, friendship, divorce, etc.*
- Loss of any form of identity
  - *For example, someone leaving a role of job, or any affiliation.*
- The loss of sense of safety, physical, psychological, and well-being.
- Any Loss of autonomy.
  - *This can include the loss of financial stability or loss of physical ability or health.*

# SYMPTOMS OF GRIEF

Grieving looks different for everyone; grieving can be dependent on how the individual's temperament, personality, and coping mechanisms are. Grieving can unveil itself, in many ways, including (but not limited to):

- **Emotions | Behavioral**
  - Sadness
  - Rumination
  - Anger
  - Denial
  - Hopelessness
  - Mood Swings
  - Guilt
  - Anxiety & Fear
  - Loneliness
  - Shock
  - Lack of Trust
  - Apathy
  - Irritability
  - Restlessness
  - Confusion
  - Crying
  - Easily Distracted
  - Memory Problems
  - Reduce attention-span
  - Lack of interest
- **Physical symptoms**
  - Changes in sleep cycle & potential disturbances
  - Insomnia
  - Fatigue
  - Shortness of breath
  - Nausea
  - Changes in appetite
  - Headaches
  - Stomach Pain
  - Dry Mouth
  - Chest pain
  - Potential disruption to the immune system

# PROCESSING GRIEF

Some may describe grief in stages or in a specific set of emotions; with that being said, there is no “right way” to grief, and there is no right or wrong set timeframe for grieving. The process of grief is completely normal, and every individual experiences grief differently.

**Myth:** For grief you have to be resilience: by having a “just be strong” attitude and move on

**Fact:** Any feeling or sense of loss, can trigger grief in someone. Grief is not an inappropriate feeling, and you don’t have to be shameful or guilty for experiencing grief. In fact, the virtue of resilience can also entail this idea of flexibility; rather than suppressing your feelings, being resilient can also mean allowing yourself to be flexible and make space to feel and process your emotions.



# SUPPORTING A GRIEVING PERSON

We may have never acquired or learned how to support a grieving person. Oftentimes, when we hear about a loved one who is experiencing grief, we may think “What if this happens to me?” Even just thinking about the thought in itself can be uncomfortable. Most people will try to elude from, distract, and avoid the pain. However, as Robert frost once said “The only way out is through.” Making space to allow you and or a loved one to experience whatever emotions may come to arise, can help with the journey towards healing. You may not know what “right words” to say to comfort your loved ones during grief; however, just being there as an: active, supportive, and non-judgmental listener may be just what your loved one needs. It is important to note, not to force anyone to talk, but rather to make space to allow them to experience their emotions when they are ready. Listening, supporting, connecting them with resources and coping strategies can all aid in their journey.





# COPING WITH GRIEF

The process of grief is different from everyone, and not every coping strategy or mechanism may suit everyone. With that in mind, here are some resources and tips that you could try and see what works best for you.

- **Make space and allow yourself to feel your emotions:** As cliché or simple this may sound, allowing yourself to sit with your feelings in this accepting and non-judgmental manner can potentially have a profound impact. Often times, we may feel the need to distract ourselves to avoid the uncomfortable emotions we experience; but that could inherently potentially be an inhibiting factor towards healing.
- **Allow yourself to express your thoughts/feelings when you are ready:** Expressing ourselves, and telling our support-system can benefit some, but expressing ourselves doesn't always have to mean telling someone, as to say. Journaling, drawing or any form of art can be mediums of expressing our feelings.
- **Being patience and gentle with yourself:** Knowing that this process make take some time, and can be exhausting, and accepting this, and being gentle with yourself, can defiantly help throughout your journey.
- **Avoiding allowing judgment from yourself or others for grieving:** You are allowed to grieve for as long as you need to, and what you or your loved one is experiencing is completely normal process and does not define your character. Judgment does not really have any place in anyone's journey.
- **Mindfulness & Mediation:** Being mindful can be beneficial for individual during grief. Some individuals may find it helpful to mindful walks or spend time in nature. Other's may prefer to mediate in silence or participate in a guided mediation.
- **Reach out for counseling:** Some individuals may feel that they would benefit from counseling to better process their grief. Others may prefer joining a support group, it's all whatever you feel is best for yourself.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Here are some additional links/resources that might be helpful



Headspace has many guided meditations, including a grief guided meditation.



Ways of Starting Grief Journal



Online Journaling Prompts



Creative Grief Exercises

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

It is an axiomatic truth, that grieving can be a challenge for anyone who experiences it. If you, or a loved one are experiencing grief, know that it's okay. It's okay to experience grief, it is a natural response, and does not make you or your loved one any less strong. Often times we might feel the need to dismiss the thoughts or feelings, however I encourage you to acknowledge what you are feeling. I wish you all the best in your journey, and I leave you with a quote; As Vicki Harrison said, "Grief is like the ocean; it comes on waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim."



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