



GriefCare for Families
Module 2: Helping your family adapt after a loss
Topic 2: Managing painful emotions

It is natural to experience strong, painful emotions when you are grieving. You might feel like you just have to get through this. You might try to push these feelings away. GriefCare for Families encourages you to accept and manage painful emotions rather than simply enduring or avoiding them. When you try to get rid of an emotion, it can have the opposite effect and add to the intensity of your pain. Trying to endure the pain and waiting for it to be over keeps you from being in the moment, even though you're there physically.

Instead of trying to get rid of your feelings, you might decide to accept your grief emotions, see what you can learn from them and use a range of strategies for managing them. This can help you realize that you're in charge, not your emotions. It might help to remember that strong emotions do not mean you are weak or self-indulgent. As you practice acceptance you will find it gets easier and the emotional activation decreases.

Common grief emotions

People often think of grief as strong feelings of sorrow. In fact, people almost always experience a lot of different emotions during acute grief. Paying attention to your emotions, accepting them and learning from them can help you and your family adapt to your loss.

Sadness and yearning: These feelings are at the heart of grief. Sadness and yearning are painful, but also contain a sweetness. These are the emotions we feel when we lose someone who matters to us. We feel sad when we lose someone we care about. The sadness we feel at any given time is a reflection of how much we are missing the person right then. Most people find that after someone we love dies, our lives are permanently sadder. This does not mean that sadness is all we feel. It does not mean that sadness dominates our lives. Sadness lessens as we adapt to the loss, find comfort in a new kind of relationship with the person who died and envision our life moving forward in a promising way.

Loneliness: Almost everyone feels lonely when they lose someone close. Loneliness is the feeling we have when we are not feeling we have a strong bond to other people. If there is one word that defines grief it is "disconnected". It is natural during acute grief to feel like you have lost your connection to the person who died. Along with this, you might feel disconnected from your past and yourself more generally, disconnected from others around you and disconnected from your future. Loneliness is a very painful

feeling but it does not need to be permanent. It's still helpful to acknowledge the feeling and to think about ways to slowly rebuild your connections.

Anger: Grieving people are often angry. It's natural to feel angry when someone you love dies. It's natural to feel it is unfair or wrong and to want to blame someone or something. There might be things about the way your loved one died that make you angry. Something that happened before or after the death might anger you. Anger is very common during acute grief and it can be a difficult feeling. The first topic in managing anger is to notice and accept what you are feeling. You can then think about what triggered your anger and decide how you want to deal with it.

Anxiety: It's natural to feel anxious when someone you love dies. Our loved ones anchor our lives. Caring for them gives our life meaning. We can count on them when things go wrong. They look out for us. When someone in your family dies, your family life changes. Your children are affected. You have to deal with changes in yourself. You might have to take over things you haven't done before. It's natural to feel nervous or anxious. Anxiety makes you want to avoid thinking about what's making you anxious. However, try not to avoid these thoughts. Instead, try to accept your feelings and think about how to manage what is activating.

Guilt: Guilt is a difficult emotion that almost everyone feels during acute grief. You might feel guilty about living and enjoying life when the person you love can no longer do this. It's important to acknowledge this survivor guilt because it can make you feel like you should not move forward or value your own life. It's also very common to feel remorse or self-blame over things you wish you had or had not done. Chances are, there is something you wish you had done differently. That's very natural. It might help to remember the secular serenity prayer. We need to have the wisdom and courage to focus on what we can change and to accept what we cannot change. Having self-compassion can help with acceptance.

Other feelings: You might experience feelings of shame, depression, fear, or almost any other painful feeling when you are grieving. It's important to pay attention to those feelings and not judge yourself harshly. Feelings are a big part of grief. Feelings are an aspect of who you are, but do not define you.

More about emotions

Emotions are a natural part of life. They are triggered by our own thoughts and also by things that we see or hear. People vary in their sensitivity to emotional activation. During acute grief you're likely to be highly sensitive to things that remind you of your friend or family member's death. You might be experiencing a lot of strong emotions.

Painful emotions can be helpful

Painful emotions are unpleasant, but they can help you solve problems. Emotional pain is a signal that something is meaningful to you. If you accept your emotions and pay attention to them, you can use those emotions to learn things about yourself. Emotional pain can also provide clues in ways to relieve it. Grief emotions provide motivation to make changes that help you adapt to the loss.

Managing strong emotions

Most people find that acute grief brings emotions that are stronger and more unpredictable than any prior experience. This can happen at inconvenient times. We have suggestions for things you can do to manage a strong wave of grief.

- Observe what you're feeling, name it; accept the feeling and its intensity without being self-critical or thinking you are being mistreated
- Be deliberate in accepting your emotions and allowing yourself to gently set the emotion aside; don't pressure yourself; tell yourself something calming like "I am feeling very sad right now. It's ok if others see I am sad and it's also ok to set this feeling aside for now. I can focus on it later." Be sure not to be self-critical if you have trouble setting the feeling aside.
- Focus on your breathing; count your breaths; most emotions increase your breathing rate; breathe a little more slowly if you can. Try breathing in through your nose to the count of five and exhale out of your mouth to the count of ten.
- Notice something around you; gently shift your focus to something outside of yourself; you might notice the color or shape of something; do this in a neutral, observing way. You might tell yourself something like, "That bench is dark brown."
- Do some physical activity; walk around, move your arms and legs; if you can leave the room, do something more vigorous, like running or jumping.

Pleasurable emotions in grief

Positive emotions are also a natural part of grief. You might feel uncomfortable having positive emotions. You might think others will judge you if you laugh or have fun. You may feel like you are betraying the person who died if you are experiencing positive emotions. However, having pleasurable feelings is an important way of taking care of yourself. They can help you adapt to your loss.

It's important to notice your pleasurable feelings and allow yourself to appreciate them. These kinds of emotions open your mind to new ideas and make it easier to solve problems. They're also good for your physical health. It's important to make some time for pleasant experiences in your life.

You might need to look for opportunities to have pleasant feelings. You can do any of these things with your children. Help them relax and have fun, as well. You might think you would like to find the opportunities, but you can't think of what to do. Below is a list of the kinds of things you might do. You can message our team if you want more help in thinking about what to do.

- Do something silly or fun
- Do something quiet and relaxing
- Do something stimulating or interesting
- Learn something interesting from the internet

Many cultures have standards for experiencing positive emotions after a loss. In some cultures bereaved people are expected to do pleasurable things starting immediately after the death. In other cultures happiness is allowed only after a prescribed period of time has passed. How and when you experience pleasant emotions is up to you, but eventually you may want to be sure they are there.

Balancing pain and respite

It's important to allow yourself to both experience emotional pain and then set it aside. You might want to help your children do this, too. It's very natural for both children and adults to try to escape from pain or to avoid activating it. However, excessive avoidance is not a good idea when you are grieving. Neither is it a good idea to let emotional pain take over completely.

Reminders of your loved one are important to you because you don't want to forget your loved one. However, reminders can be painful. It's best to find a balance between experiencing painful emotions and setting them aside.

Self-compassion

It's important to remember that you're not alone in your suffering. We all experience emotional pain because of things that happen in our lives and because of things we think about, or do. It's always important to be kind to yourself and not harsh or critical. This is especially helpful when you are grieving. Even though it can feel like the pain is all there is in life, it's not really true. You can still have positive feelings and satisfying experiences during acute grief.

You might be a very compassionate person, but practicing self-compassion is different. It's not easy or intuitive. When you experience a painful emotion, it's natural to ask, "Why did I do that?" or "Why did this happen to me?" You may need to make a deliberate choice to be compassionate to yourself and not harsh or self-critical.

A simple daily ritual

A simple daily ritual can help build pleasant emotions. Make a commitment to take a little time each day to do a simple activity that you might enjoy. Do this on your own or with your children. Consider this a daily ritual, even if you have other demands on your time.

Imagine some simple things that are easy to do, and not time-consuming. Think of things you might enjoy - even if you don't feel ready to enjoy them. The activities might be things you do alone or they might involve a friend or family member. You might do them on your own or with your children. Try to come up with a list of things that are easy to incorporate into a daily routine.

If you are having trouble coming up with ideas, it might help to see examples of things other people have done. Examples include:

- Having a cup of tea or coffee with a friend
- Watching children play
- Reading a book
- Window shopping
- Surfing the internet
- Making cookies

If you have trouble with this, you can message our team, or talk about it with a trusted friend or a professional counselor.

If you feel put-off or offended by the idea of enjoying things, you may be experiencing survivor guilt.

Once you have a list, pick something to do each day. This can be the same thing every day or it can be something different. It's up to you. Do the activity you planned. Try to stay in the moment and enjoy it as much as you can. Take a few minutes to reflect on how it went. Think about how you felt. Name the feelings you experienced. If there were painful feelings, try to identify what activated those feelings and think about how you responded to them. If there were pleasant feelings, take a few minutes to appreciate them.

If you're having trouble doing a pleasant activity every day - or even if you are not doing it at all yet, it's important to keep trying. Please don't be critical or judgmental. You need to do these things in your own way.

