

What Am I To Do with My Grief?

Grief. It is something every human experiences. But is it something to be avoided? NO.

Grief is a **natural** and **normal** reaction to a loss. It is a process that **must be experienced** to find healing to move forward in life.

There are many misconceptions about grief (internal process) and mourning (external expressions of grief). Here is a look at what grief IS and ISN'T:

| What is Grief Anyway? | |
|--|--|
| ISN'T | IS |
| A problem to be fixed or a condition to cure | Normal, natural process after a loss |
| Predictable with a set of emotional stages | Emotions unique to each person and each loss |
| Only applies to death | Happens with all loss of something significant: job, dreams, health, etc. |
| Only about emotions | Involves the whole person: emotional, physical, mental, spiritual |
| Has a proper way to mourn | There is not a "best" way to mourn. Healthy coping & memorializing have endless options |
| Something to "get over" | Grief stays with us – just looks & feels different over time. It is something we "move through" |
| Has clear timeframe for normal grief | Timeframes vary per person, per loss, per circumstances |
| Time will heal your grief | Actions lead to healing – they just take time |
| There are certain grief behaviors that are acceptable, others are not. | Coping and mourning are affected by culture, family expectations, previous experiences, how loss happened, and other factors. Finding healthy coping is the key to a healthy process |
| Best kept to oneself | Research shows that talking about the loss helps with the process |
| Placing loss in the past is best – trying to forget | Moving on in life is desired, but this includes more than setting it aside. Acceptance of the loss and finding meaning are part of the process |
| Cured with medications | Normal grief cannot be "cured", as it is not a disease. Meds can help with the initial shock of a loss or in complicated grief, but we cannot medicate our way out of the process |
| Only comes from a negative loss | Can accompany transitions in life, such as empty nest, retirement, weddings, etc. |
| There is a best way to grieve | Grief is affected by what one believes about life/death, core values, & thinking habits, making grief a multilayered journey with no one best way for all people |

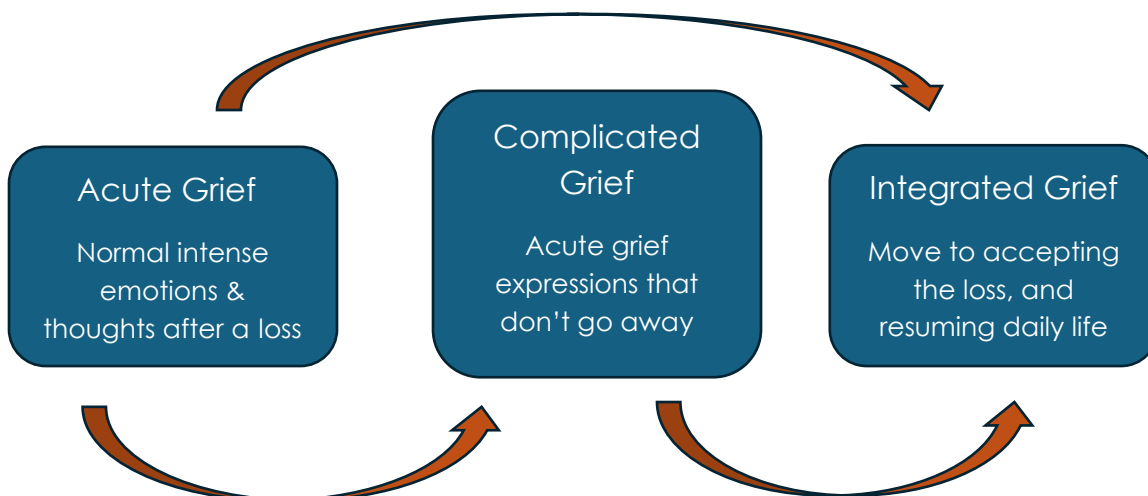
Where do I start?

- Accepting that emotions **are normal reactions** is the first step on one's road to healing. Grief will bring a wide range of emotions, from sadness to anger to denial to guilt. If you have any emotion, it is a natural part of your grief.
- Accepting that how we express grief is **a unique and personal experience** can take the pressure off "having to do things the right way." There is no universal way to respond or process grief.
- Seek **healthy ways to express your grief** and memorialize the loss. Whatsyourgrief.com has booklets on navigating loss and ways to cope. We highly recommend their material.

What is Complicated Grief?

For some people, grief can become too painful and grow into something completely different, like anxiety or depression. Or the intense emotions of early grief take over a person's life for months, even years. These are signs that a person may have **complicated grief** and need professional help.

In normal grief processing, a person often begins with what is called **acute grief**, the strong responses to recent loss, and moves toward what has been called **integrated grief or resolved grief**. But about 10% of grieverers may develop complicated grief. This adds a step in the process and needs addressed to move toward integrated grief.



ISN'T GRIEF JUST A FORM OF DEPRESSION?

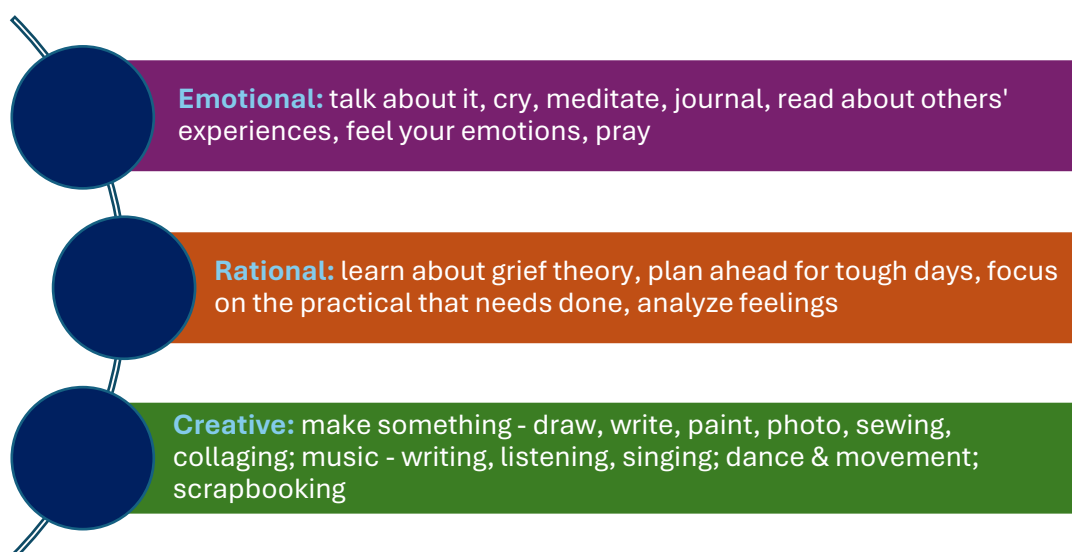
Some grief emotions can look a lot like a Major Depressive Episode (MDE), but **they are different**. The first is a natural response to loss; the latter can be characterized as an illness. A significant loss reaction may include intense sadness, being unable to stop thinking about the loss, insomnia, appetite and weight changes, all of which can be present with MDE. This makes telling the two apart more difficult at times.

The following may be helpful for determining if it is best to seek professional help for depression.

| Distinguishing Grief from Major Depressive Episodes** | |
|---|---|
| GRIEF | MAJOR DEPRESSIVE EPISODE |
| May feel empty and lost | Persistent despondent mood |
| Decrease in intensity over days to weeks, occurs in waves – pangs of grief – associated with thoughts or reminders of the deceased/loss | Occurs most of the day, every day. |
| Any self-critical or fault-finding ideation typically involves perceived failings to the deceased/loss | Self-critical and pessimistic ruminations, feelings of worthlessness |
| Any thoughts about death or dying are focused on the deceased – often about “joining them” | Any thoughts of death are focused on one's own life because of the feelings of worthlessness, undeserving of life, or inability to cope with the pain of the loss |

What Can Healthy Coping Look Like?

There are so many ways to cope, and each person will find different forms to be more helpful than others. This can change while going through the process as well as with each loss you experience. Generally, healthy coping tools fall into three categories: Emotional – Rational – Creative. *^ Below are examples of each:



Is There Anything Else to Consider?

A couple of tips:

- Seeking support from a group, a trusted friend, clergy, or therapist are all great ways to start to make sense of your loss.
- Take care of yourself – eat well, move, get sleep, shower, drink plenty of water (especially if crying a lot).
- Get outside! Nature is healing.
- Pamper yourself with naps, manicures, massages, going to a sporting event. Whatever sounds like a treat to you.
- Keep your routine as much as possible.
- Don't overuse alcohol and medications.
- Care for something: a plant, pets, the birds, your home, people in need.
- Say no to things that will drain your already limited energy.
- Say yes to things that bring you goodness and light.

This short primer is a start to understanding and moving through your grief. For more exploration into navigating loss, we recommend the following references. Take care and be well.

References:

Whatsyourgrief.com

*^: Credit for coping strategy categories

Hospice of Cincinnati

www.hospiceofcincinnati.org

Lindner Center of HOPE

Spiritual Care

www.lindnercenterofhope.org/spiritualcare

Refuge in Grief

refugeingrief.com

The Mourner's Bill of Rights by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

** Chart taken from article: Complicated grief in the DSM-5: Problems and solutions by Colin Murray Parkes, Archive of Psychiatry and Mental Health, 2020;4;048-051

