

Grief Myths

Grief is universal, but also unique: Everyone encounters grief, but no two people grieve in the same way. Even so, there are many myths about how people “should” grieve. Use this handout to learn the truth about these myths and reflect more deeply on your own grief journey.

Myth: There is a “right” way to grieve.

Reality: Some people cry. Some people scream. Some want to be alone, while others seek out social connection. Responses to grief vary widely from culture to culture and person to person.

There’s no one correct way to grieve. What’s helpful in one moment may not be helpful in the next moment. Trust what feels right to you.

Myth: Only the loss of a loved one causes grief.

Reality: Many types of loss may cause grief. Sometimes it’s the loss of a loved one. Other times it’s the loss of a job or a life role. You can grieve pets, environmental destruction, and the plight of others.

Grief can also happen when life doesn’t meet your expectations or forces you to acknowledge limitations. For example, you may grieve a chronic illness or the physical changes of aging.

Myth: People need therapy to recover from grief.

Reality: In many cases, therapy is not needed. However, some people feel therapy helps them navigate their grief journey, particularly when intense emotions are long-lasting, or if depression sets in.

Evaluate your need for professional support on a regular basis.

Myth: Avoid bringing up someone’s grief.

Reality: Many feel their grief is invisible or unimportant to others, which can be a lonely experience. For some people, sharing or discussing their grief with others can be therapeutic.

Acknowledging someone’s grief—through a hug or kind word—is a powerful way to offer support and social connection. If you feel unable to do this face to face, consider calling or writing the bereaved.

Myth: Grief should resolve after a certain period of time.

Reality: Grief has no time frame. Some feel acute grief for a short time, while others struggle much longer. Grief can also change in intensity around holidays, anniversaries, and stressful life events.

While grief often lessens with time, significant losses will likely have an enduring impact.

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Myth: Grief follows distinct stages.

Reality: Despite the popular belief that grief has five distinct stages, research does not back this up. You might skip stages or go through them in reverse order. Or they may not apply at all.

Feel free to refer to stage models if they are helpful, but follow your intuition above all else. No matter how it looks, your grief is real, valid, and meaningful. There is no one map for the grief journey.

Myth: Grief is experienced in the same way across all cultures.

Reality: Culture strongly shapes the grief experience. Some cultures see grief as private and personal, while others approach it as a communal phenomenon.

Even within the same culture, individuals may grieve very differently based on factors such as age, religion, personality, family situation, and past experiences.

Myth: Grief is just an intense form of sadness.

Reality: Grief includes sadness, but it can also include many other emotions, such as guilt, anger, and jealousy. Even positive emotions—such as joy, gratitude, and hope—may be part of the grief experience.

You may have a rollercoaster of emotions around grief, particularly when a loss is recent. Then again, you may find that your emotions are consistent and predictable. Experiences vary widely.

Myth: Moving on is a betrayal of the deceased.

Reality: After a loss, some feel they can't allow themselves to be happy, enter a new relationship, or move forward in life.

Going on with life and seeking happiness does not mean that you have forgotten or stopped loving the person you lost. It's okay to move forward at the speed that feels right to you.

Myth: Advice is the best way to help someone who is grieving.

Reality: The temptation to give advice can be hard to resist. While your intentions may be good, advice can come across as impersonal or even judgmental.

Your presence is often the best thing you can offer the bereaved. Allow yourself to be affected by their pain, remind them how much you care, and be sensitive to their needs and wishes.