



# SAFE PASSAGE

## *Understanding Grief*

Kansas City Hospice & Palliative Care  [www.kchospice.org](http://www.kchospice.org)

### ■ *What is grief?*

Grief is a normal and natural response to a loss. Each person's grief is unique and each of us must grieve in our own way. Grief can be painful, long and unpredictable. It can cause us to feel anxious, confused, sad, overwhelmed and uncertain.

### ■ *What is the work of grief?*

Although the passage of time can be helpful, it's what you do with the time that matters. It's important to take an active role in your healing process.

The Four Tasks of Grief below are based on the research of Dr. William Worden. He uses tasks instead of stages or steps, because there is no specific order in which people grieve. You may find yourself working on multiple tasks at once. You may find that you work on these tasks in subtle ways, as you move towards healing.

#### **THE FIRST TASK: ACKNOWLEDGING THE REALITY OF THE DEATH**

Often when a death occurs, you can't or don't want to believe it. A sense of shock and numbness is normal, even when the death was expected. People often go on autopilot to get through the memorial service and initial decision making. This can help protect us from pain until we can better process the loss.

Allow yourself a chance to talk or write freely about what happened. With each retelling, some of the intense emotions associated with the loss are released. It's common to have momentary lapses of memory, where we expect our loved one to be at home when we get there, or at the other end of the phone. We may know logically that a person is gone, but with each new reminder of their absence, we may have to work towards acknowledging the reality of the loss.

#### **THE SECOND TASK: PROCESSING THE EMOTIONS OF GRIEF**

It may be difficult to sort out feelings related to the loss. Some common feelings are: anger, anxiety, sadness, irritability, loneliness, hopelessness, apathy/disinterest, guilt, regret, longing, helplessness or feeling lost. You may experience a sense of relief because your loved one is no longer suffering. Finding ways to process these emotions is an important part of this task.

Some people process by telling or writing the story of what has happened and how they are feeling. Letting tears flow freely can be important for some, but the absence of tears does not mean an absence of grief. It can be uncomfortable for many of us to experience such strong emotions, but allowing ourselves to process them can help bring healing. It's important for you to allow yourself to experience the pain of grief. There is no easy way through grief and if you ignore or repress your feelings, you may delay healing.

*"Mourning is the constant reawakening  
that things are now different."*

- Stephanie Ericsson

#### **THE THIRD TASK: LEARNING TO LIVE WITHOUT YOUR LOVED ONE**

You may have lost your best friend, confidant, source of income, handyman or cook. The absence of this person may change your world completely. You may have to learn new responsibilities or change daily routines. Your own sense of identity may change. You may need to create a new social network. You may find yourself asking: How can I and how will I live without my loved one? While you are dealing with this loss, it's helpful to minimize other changes. If possible, it's best not to move, change jobs, or make other changes during the first year.

# COMMON WAYS PEOPLE REACT DURING GRIEF

<i>CHANGES IN MENTAL FUNCTIONING</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inability to focus</li> <li>• Difficulty making decisions</li> <li>• Difficulty processing information</li> <li>• Disorganization</li> <li>• Difficulties with memory</li> <li>• Preoccupation with the deceased</li> <li>• Fear of “losing your mind”</li> </ul>		
<i>PHYSICAL RESPONSES</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change in appetite</li> <li>• Shortness of breath</li> <li>• Deep sighing</li> <li>• Tightness in throat</li> <li>• Lowered resistance to illness</li> <li>• Stomach problems</li> <li>• Increased sensitivity to noise</li> <li>• Sleep disturbance</li> <li>• Headaches</li> <li>• Weakness</li> <li>• Tight Muscles</li> <li>• Fatigue</li> <li>• Trembling</li> <li>• Dizziness</li> </ul> <p>While all of these symptoms are often normal, it is also a good idea for a person who is grieving to consult with their physician if these symptoms are concerning</p>		
<i>EMOTIONAL RESPONSES</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Numbness</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Bitterness</li> <li>• Feeling lost</li> <li>• Anxiety</li> <li>• Desire to run away</li> <li>• Sadness</li> <li>• Loneliness</li> <li>• Emptiness</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Relief</li> <li>• Guilt</li> <li>• Yearning</li> <li>• Apathy</li> <li>• Regret</li> <li>• Confusion</li> </ul>		
<i>BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crying or sobbing</li> <li>• Talking to your loved one</li> <li>• Looking for loved one</li> <li>• Feeling the presence of the deceased</li> <li>• Vivid dreams related to the loss</li> <li>• Restless over-activity</li> <li>• Decrease in productivity</li> <li>• Carrying objects or wearing clothing that belongs to the deceased</li> <li>• Difficulty engaging in self-care</li> <li>• Easily distracted</li> </ul>		
<i>SOCIAL RESPONSES</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoiding places where memories are strong</li> <li>• Visiting places that hold memories of the deceased</li> <li>• Withdrawing from social activities</li> <li>• Over-engaging socially</li> <li>• Feeling uncomfortable in social situations</li> <li>• Preoccupation with health and well-being of your loved ones</li> <li>• Avoiding friends and family</li> <li>• Being easily distracted</li> </ul>		
<i>SPIRITUAL RESPONSES</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anger that prayers were not answered</li> <li>• Sense of abandonment or punishment at a time of deepest need</li> <li>• Questioning “Why?” or “Why now?”</li> <li>• Loss of meaning or purpose</li> <li>• Searching for meaning and purpose</li> <li>• Questioning faith beliefs</li> </ul>		

## THE FOURTH TASK: FINDING A WAY TO REMEMBER YOUR LOVED ONE

At some point in your grief, you realize you can choose to move on to a life beyond loss. This does not mean forgetting. You're not being disloyal. Starting a new chapter in your life does not mean that you can't stay in touch with your sadness, or that tears will stop. It means that you have decided to accept two realities: that your loved one has died and that your life goes on. This is a time to consider how you will keep their memory alive, and to reflect on what their life has meant to you. While your life will not be the same, you can find healing, happiness and fulfillment again.

### ■ *How to Help Yourself as You Grieve*

#### Take Care of Your Health

Get adequate food and rest. If you are due for a physical, or have postponed health screenings or follow-ups, make an appointment. Exercise can help release tension, anxiety and frustration. It can help fight depression and promote feelings of well-being.

#### Make Space for your Loss

Sometimes people keep themselves so busy, they don't allow themselves time to grieve. Respect your need for healing time and create opportunities to grieve.

#### Talk about your loss

You may need to retell the same stories as part of your healing. A support group may be helpful.

#### Write about your loss

Keeping a journal can be a powerful healing tool. Writing can help focus and identify emotions.

#### Cry about your loss

Trust your body's need to cry or not to cry. When words fail, tears can help us to release pain.

#### Be Good to Yourself

Plan things you can look forward to. Create pleasant times with family and friends. Schedule a massage. Take a walk. See a movie. Allow yourself to enjoy.

## Be Patient with Yourself

Grieving is a process that takes time. There is no set timetable. It may be good for you to look back from time to time and see how far you've come.

### Give Yourself Time

As much as possible, it's advisable to wait to make major life changes such as moving or changing careers during the first year after a loss. If you find it's necessary to make a life change, it may be valuable to seek out additional support.

*"There is sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are the messengers of overwhelming grief... unspeakable love."* - Washington Irving

### ■ *Coping with Anxiety*

One common emotion during grief is anxiety. Some of the symptoms are shortness of breath, sweating, nausea, trembling or shaking, and dizziness. Other symptoms include a fear of going crazy or being out of control, and a feeling of detachment or being out of touch with your body. It may be helpful to talk about your feelings with others. It's also important to access support from family and friends.

Expressing emotions through creativity can be valuable. Try writing, painting or music. Some find it helpful to read literature related to grief or anxiety. Taking part in activities that you enjoy can help. Many find comfort in prayer or participation in spiritual practices. It's also a good idea to monitor your diet, and avoid excessive caffeine and alcohol.

### ■ *Coping with Anger*

Anger is an expected, common response to grief. We may feel anger at our loved one for leaving us, anger at a higher power for allowing our loved one to be taken from us, or anger at others for perceived insensitivity. Some may feel angry at the medical community for "failing." Journaling about anger may be a beneficial way to cope. Others may find channeling anger into volunteer efforts or service as a

path to healing. We may be uncomfortable with feelings of anger, but recognizing and dealing with this feeling is an important step on the path to healing.

### ■ *Coping with Guilt*

Many people feel some degree of guilt after the loss of a loved one. When a loved one dies, we may remember things we said or did that may have hurt them, or things we wish we'd said or done. Your loss may bring up old issues, feelings and conflicts from the past. Writing a letter to your loved one, and writing a response letter (what your loved one might say to you) can be good tools for coping with guilt. Talking to a trusted friend or spiritual advisor may also be valuable. Suppressing or ignoring guilt only adds to its intensity.

*"The man who removed mountains  
began by carrying away small stones."*

- Chinese Proverb

## Guidance Through the Journey of Grief

Kansas City Hospice is here to support you on your journey of healing – to help you find ways to cope and provide support, guidance and hope for the future.

In the weeks after the death of your loved one, a Grief Support Specialist will attempt to contact you. If you wish, one of our staff will visit with you to explain our programs.

Together, the two of you will decide which of our services may be helpful to you.

### Grief Support Services

Our Grief Support Specialists have backgrounds in social work or counseling, and experience in working with grieving people.

### Individual Support

One-on-one counseling helps you through the grief process – in person or by phone.

### Volunteer Support

Trained volunteers provide emotional and social support through phone calls.

### Education and Support

Workshops and support groups are offered at several locations for adults who have lost a loved one. Topics include: understanding the grief process, dealing with difficult emotions, role changes, handling the holidays, finding support systems and learning new practical skills.

### Mailings

Information is mailed for a year following your loss, including articles on grief, invitations to memorial events and more. You may choose to receive information by email. (See back page.)

### Website

Information, articles and links on grief support for is available on our website at [kchospice.org/grief](http://kchospice.org/grief).

### Solace House

Solace House, a center for grief and healing, is a nurturing place to guide children and adults through the difficult time following a death. There are peer support groups for ages 3 through adult, plus individual, couples and family grief support. [www.solacehouse.org](http://www.solacehouse.org)

### Passages Counseling/Other Mental Health Referrals

Some people may benefit from counseling of a broader scope if dealing with multiple losses, complicated grief, trauma, the emotional effects of medical issues, difficult transitions or other mental health concerns. Passages provides psychotherapy and practical solutions for coping and healing. Most Medicare and insurance plans are accepted. If you prefer, referral to other mental health professionals is also available.

### Grief Camps

We currently offer two weekend overnight retreats. Camp Erin is for teens and children who have experienced the death of someone close to them. Camp Carousel is for grieving families with school-aged children and teens.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### *How will I benefit from grief support services?*

Sometimes it helps to talk with someone outside your family or friends to focus on your own feelings. Our staff are skilled, caring, non-judgmental listeners. We'll help you understand your feelings and teach you ways to cope that work with your life.

### *I have good support from my family, friends and religious community. How can grief support help me?*

We can never replace the people in your life. But, even with many people around, you may feel alone. You may hesitate to share your grief with others for fear of burdening them. You may find when trying to talk about feelings, others turn away or change the subject, or appear to be uncomfortable. We'll help you learn better ways to communicate with your family and friends and meet people who are also experiencing grief.

### *How will it help me to talk to someone about my grief? It won't bring my loved one back.*

You may be overwhelmed, realizing that life will never be the same. We help guide you in this difficult period and help you understand what this loss means in your life. We believe while you never really forget, the pain of your grief becomes less intense with time.

### *Since my loved one died, I have been very busy and don't have time to grieve. How can you help me?*

Following a death, you may be occupied by the details of the estate. Keeping busy at work, spending time with family or starting a major project may provide a needed distraction from grief. We respect these realities, but know that delaying feelings of grief does not make it go away. Experiencing grief in the way most comfortable for you will help lessen painful emotions.

### *It was hard at first, but I think I've pulled myself together. How do I know if I'm grieving?*

Grief is usually associated with sadness, depression, lack of energy and wanting to be alone. But, grief can look very different. Some people need to always be with others.

Some keep themselves busy and others may have physical symptoms – difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite, fatigue, frequent colds or stomach complaints. Grief may even temporarily affect memory. We can help you understand and deal with your unique situation.

### *What are some common fears or misconceptions about grief counseling?*

Some people fear that needing grief counseling means they are “crazy” or have a mental illness, but grief is natural. People may feel that asking for help with their emotions is a sign of weakness – they should be able to pull themselves together and get on with life. We believe that asking for help is a sign of strength and your commitment to help yourself feel better.

### *Could grief support sessions make me feel worse?*

Some people feel more emotional after sessions. As you talk about your grief, feelings come to the surface. Although painful at first, you can work through these feelings and release them. Unexpressed feelings can turn into physical illness, family conflict or work problems.

### *Is a grief support group right for me?*

Many people find sharing their story with others who have “been there” is very positive. It can help you feel less lonely and isolated. People who were hesitant to come to a group often find that strangers (who are also grieving) can quickly become an important source of support and comfort. Group leaders will never require you to share more than you are ready to share.

### *I think I'm doing all right, but can you help my family members?*

Yes. We will discuss your concern about other family members with you and can offer grief support to them, but each person must decide whether to accept.

### *I have family members out of town who may need grief support. How can we access services for them?*

Out-of-town family may have been involved in caring for a loved one but must eventually return home. Grief support services can be accessed through hospices in other areas.

(continued on back)



## Find a Local Hospice

(Family members access to grief support in their area)

Hospice Link..... 800.331.1620

National Hospice Organization Help Line..... 800.658.8898

## Other Resources

NAMI National Helpline..... 800.950.6264  
(National Alliance on Mental Illness)

National Alliance for Grieving Children ... [childrengrieve.org](http://childrengrieve.org)

The Moyer Foundation ..... [moyerfoundation.org](http://moyerfoundation.org)

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline ..... 800.273.8255

Veteran-Specific Suicide Assistance..... 800.784.2433

Jason Foundation ..... 888.881.2323  
(youth suicide prevention)

## Receive Email Updates

Sign up to receive emails on topics of interest, including grief support. Unsubscribe at any time.

[kchospice.org/email-signup](http://kchospice.org/email-signup)



## Kansas City Hospice & Palliative Care

We are a not-for-profit organization offering a range of services for people of all ages and at all stages of serious illness.

Our programs include:

- ▶ **Advanced Illness Support** — in-home consultation services to help guide you through complex healthcare systems and medical decisions
- ▶ **Kansas City Palliative Home Care** — supportive home health care for people at any stage of serious illness, offered during treatment and before the need for hospice
- ▶ **Kansas City Hospice** — comfort, expert care and compassion at home or in a nursing home
- ▶ **Carousel** — care for seriously ill children
- ▶ **Kansas City Hospice House™** — inpatient care in the comfort of a homelike setting
- ▶ **NorthCare Hospice House** — compassionate inpatient care in the Northland

For more information or to schedule a complimentary assessment to see if one of our programs may be helpful to you, call:

Kansas City Hospice & Palliative Care  
816.363.2600  
[kchospice.org](http://kchospice.org)

*Passages*  
Counseling for  
Life Transitions  
[kchospice.org/passages](http://kchospice.org/passages)  
816.363.2600