

# CARELETTER™

Guiding *Me* through life's passages.

## Rice Mortuary

### UNDERSTANDING GRIEF by Dr. Bill Webster

The words of the doctor seemed to have such a hollow ring to them as they impacted my numb and disbelieving brain. I felt as if an invisible hand was pushing me off my chair. I struggled to grasp what I was being told. The whole situation had an air of unreality about it. It was like a bad dream. I expected to wake up at any second and realize to my relief that this wasn't really happening. But it was happening. My wife, a young woman in her thirties, had died of a heart attack. The days that followed would be full of new challenges, not the least of which was being a single parent to my two sons, then 9 and 7 years of age. But the biggest challenge of all was not as immediately apparent.

I was beginning a grief process. I didn't even know there was such a thing as a grief process, far less how to deal with it. There is not much understanding of grief in our society. We have not learned what IS normal after a significant loss... what we should expect, what emotions we will experience, how long the process continues. Many

#### *Dear friend,*

*The purpose of this first issue of our Careletter, is to continue our efforts to help you following your loss. Additional issues will be sent to you each month for the next year with our compliments. In them you will find articles from grief and recovery professionals on coping with grief.*

*Through these Careletters, we hope to help you cope during the next few days and months...until your hurt begins to subside, your strength returns, and your spirit rises.*

people, albeit with good intentions, try to rationalize the situation, with phrases like "it's a blessing in disguise," or "maybe it's for the best." These statements may or may not be true. But for us, it doesn't feel like a blessing. To us, it's NOT for the best... in fact, we may feel it is the worst thing that could have happened.

Perhaps you have experienced a significant loss recently. I wish I could sit down and listen to you tell me about the special relationship you had with the person, whatever that relationship happened to be. Whether you have experienced the loss of a spouse, a parent, a child, or the loss of a relative, friend or colleague, whenever we experience a loss, we experience grief.

This article is designed to help us understand grief and to validate the many emotions we may experience after a loss. Grief is normal, yet saying it is normal does not minimize its difficulty. Grief is one of life's most challenging experiences, and I hope reading this will help you cope with it.

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### "Grief Involves Suffering"

Grief is an emotional response to a significant loss. Because it is an emotion, it is difficult to describe. The Scots have a saying that some things are better "felt than tell't." Grief is one of these things. Whenever we lose someone (or something), or an attachment is broken, we can experience a painful reaction. To experience grief is to acknowledge that you have loved someone, and now that person has gone. If you hadn't needed that relationship, or risked the emotional attachment, you wouldn't be feeling the loss. But you did, and, oh yes, it was worth the risk. It is a high compliment to any relationship that we miss it enough to shed a tear and feel emotional. How awful if we didn't! Tears are not a sign of weakness, but an indication of how special the relationship was, and, now that it is gone, we miss it. To experience grief is to acknowledge that you are human.

### "Grief Involves Surprises"

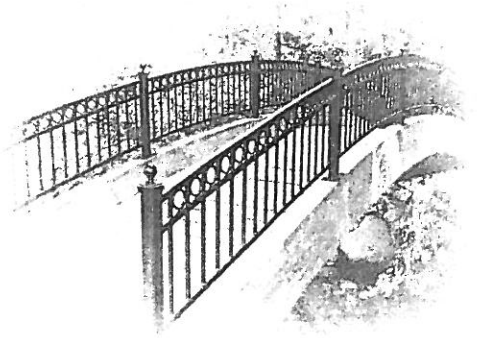
Because we have not understood grief, its intensity often comes as a surprise. We can find ourselves bewildered by the avalanche of emotions that can impact us. Among these emotions are numbness, shock, confusion, disbelief, anxiety, absent mindedness, restlessness, crying, fatigue, appetite disorders, sleep disruptions, physical symptoms, anger, guilt, depression, and the list goes on.

What is most surprising is that every person's grief process is unique. Some people experience certain emotions, other people experience others. Everyone is different, and so the way you respond to your unique

loss, will not be the same as anyone else's. That's why I NEVER say, "I know how you feel." I don't know, how can I? All I know is how I felt when grief touched my life. Just because one person experiences something one way does not mean another person is abnormal because their experience is different. Yet it is amazing how many people do not give others the freedom to grieve in a way that is right for them. You are unique. Your situation and the relationship you have lost is unique. So do not be surprised if your response to your loss is unique.

### "Grief Involves Surrender"

The days after the loss of my wife were confusing. I felt numb. People may have thought I was doing well, and even commended me for how strong I was. But I wasn't strong. I was numb. Even when that numbness began to wear off, I had difficulty accepting that Carolyn was really gone. I found myself searching for her: hoping to see her in the shopping mall; going to the cemetery and talking with her. I kept hoping that somehow she was going to return. Of course I didn't tell anyone this, because they might have thought I was going crazy. In fact, such feelings are not crazy. They are an important part of coming to terms with reality. But inevitably we have to surrender to the reality that we have had a loss. That may seem like the most obvious statement, yet it is exceedingly difficult to accept, and for a considerable time we fight against the idea. Sooner or later, however, we have to realize that our loved one has really gone, and will



not return. Often, it is when people think we should be getting ourselves together, we feel we are falling apart. People who do not understand the grieving process may not know that it is normal to fall apart even months after the funeral, or find Christmas, birthdays, anniversaries, or just "a year ago today" days difficult. Grief is normal. YOU are normal. Surrender to the process that follows every significant loss.

### "Grief Involves Survival"

After a loss, we may wonder how we are going to manage to go on without our loved one. It is not easy to lose whomever or whatever we have counted on for support, encouragement and indeed the confidence to face the world. When this does happen, we struggle to cope with many unexpected and surprising emotions. Basically these emotions help us face the question, How will I manage in the light of my loss? Will I be able to go on without the person?

Often in the early days after a loss, it is simply a matter of survival. That word actually derives from two Latin words... "vivo" - live, and

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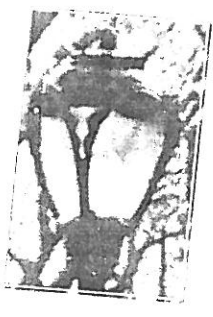
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“sur” - beyond. To survive means to find the resources to “live beyond” the experience of loss. The adjustments one must make are many. These can be practical, emotional, physical, social and spiritual. Each adjustment can be a painful process. Sometimes mere survival is a major success.

### "Grief Involves Struggle"

Grief is difficult. It is never easy to lose someone you have relied on.

This is possibly the most difficult experience of your life. There's an ancient Warrior Song that says, "Life has meaning only in the struggle, Triumph or defeat is in the hands of God. So let us celebrate



the struggle." One of the things I believe about God is that He gives us choices. In some things, we have no choice. We had no choice in the death of our loved one and much as we might like, that situation cannot be changed. But we do have a choice around what we do about it. We can choose to be bitter or better. We can choose to be victims or victors. Some people, after a loss, see themselves as a victim.

They refuse to struggle to come to terms with the situation. But it is as we struggle that we discover that with every loss there is a gain. You didn't think you could make it, but suddenly you're discovering strength and resources you didn't know you had. Expectant mothers have labor pains, teenagers have

growing pains, but out of that pain comes growth and life. That doesn't make the pain any easier, but it does help put it in a meaningful context.

Life is full of problems. Each one has the potential to be a stepping stone or a stumbling block. Will the problem trip you up and be a barrier to your progress? Or will you allow it to become a stepping stone to growth and renewed life? Stepping stone or stumbling block. Both are made of the same material. What we do with them makes all the difference.

*Dr. Bill Webster has resources on grief available at his Web site: [www.griefjourney.com](http://www.griefjourney.com). Call 905-624-8080 or, for more information, write to him at Centre for the Grief Journey, 2-3415 Dixie Road, Suite 201, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada L4Y 4J6.*

## Discussing Grief with Children

One of the most difficult tasks following the death of a loved one is discussing and explaining the death with other children in the family. This task is even more distressing when the parents are in the midst of their own grief. Since many adults have problems dealing with death, they assume that children also cannot cope with it. Parents may try to protect other children by leaving them out of the discussions and rituals associated with the death. Thus, children may feel anxious, bewildered,

and alone. The children may be left on their own to seek answers to their questions at a time when they most need the help and assurance of those around them.

All children will be affected in some way by a death in the family. Above all, children who are too young for explanations need love from the significant people in their lives to maintain their own security. Young children may not verbalize their feelings about a death in a family and may hold back their feelings. In reality they may be so overwhelmed that they may appear to be unaffected. It is common for them to express their feelings through behavior and play. Regardless of this ability or inability to express themselves, children do grieve, often very deeply.

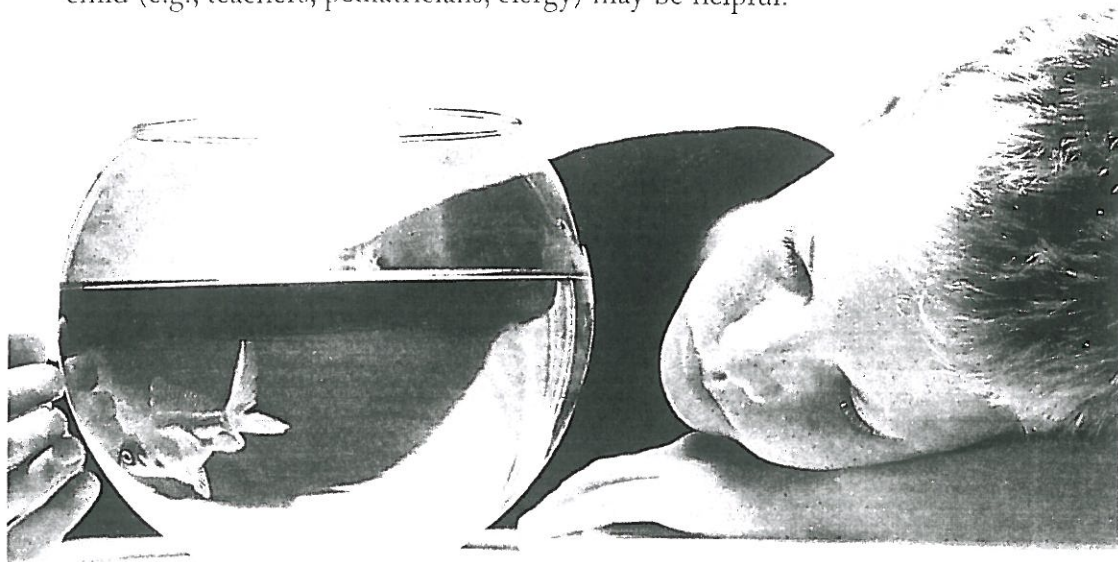


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Experts have determined that those in grief pass through four major emotions: Fear, Anger, Guilt and Sadness. It should be remembered that everyone who is touched by a death experiences these emotions to some degree – grandparents, friends, physicians, nurses and children. Each adult and child's reaction to death is individual in nature. Some common reactions are outlined in the adjacent column.

It is important to remember that all of the reactions outlined are normal expressions of grief in children. In the grieving process, time is an important factor. Experts have said that six months after a significant death in a child's life, normal routine should be resuming. If the child's reaction seems to be prolonged, seeking professional advice of those who are familiar with the child (e.g., teachers, pediatricians, clergy) may be helpful.



## SOME COMMON EXPRESSIONS OF A CHILD'S GRIEF

### Shock

The child may not believe the death really happened and will act as though it did not. This is usually because the thought of death is too overwhelming.

### Physical Symptoms

The child may have various complaints such as headaches or a stomachache and fear that he, too, will die.

### Anger

Being mostly concerned with his own needs, the child may be angry at the person who died because he feels he has been left "all alone" or that God didn't "make the person well."

### Guilt

The child may think that he caused the death by having been angry with the person who died, or he may feel responsible for having not been "better" in some way.

### Anxiety and Fear

The child may wonder who will take care of him now or fear that some other person he loves will die. He may cling to his parents or ask other people who play an important role in his life if "they love him."

### Regression

The child may revert to behaviors he had previously outgrown, such as bed wetting or thumb sucking.

### Sadness

The child may show a decrease in activity – being "too quiet."

Please write to us at this address for additional copies, with suggestions about topics you believe others would find helpful, and with your thoughts about how you have coped with this most difficult of experiences.

Your Name Rice Mortuary  
Address 5310 Torrance Blvd  
City Torrance State CA Zip 90503

To better serve you, we would appreciate your comments and suggestions:

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Article condensed from original. Reprinted courtesy of the AIDS Foundation of Washington.



# Grief, Loss *AND* Resolution


**W**hen someone we love dies, a feeling of deep, painful grief is a natural and common response. Actually, grief can be triggered by the loss of anything we value, anything in which we have invested time, energy, a part of ourselves – a job, a work of art, a beloved pet.


Whatever the cause, the feeling of grief often comes in waves. The first flooding, crushing tidal wave usually subsides within a few days or weeks, but even months later an unexpected, poignant memory will bring on tears, a sudden constriction of the chest, a lump in the throat. Over time, these peaks become less intense and less frequent, and eventually they fade away.


In most cases, though, grief and sadness are not the only emotions we experience in connection with loss. Before an impending loss, we often torture ourselves with false hopes. Afterwards, we may be consumed by guilt, even if others can see that it is irrational: “If only I had made him go to the doctor sooner.” Equally common are feelings of anger and relief. These reactions can be even more insidious in the damage that they do, because many people are ashamed of such feelings and cannot admit to them.

Various factors in ourselves or our environments can also make grief more prolonged and difficult, by leaving behind a sense of unresolved issues or by delaying or interfering with the process of resolution. For example, if the death was very sudden, there will be a sense of many things left undone and unsaid. If we deny our own feelings or perceive that others disapprove of them because they are not “proper” or “legitimate,” we do not get rid of the feelings – we only cut ourselves off from dealing with them. If multiple losses have occurred in too short a time in the past, we may not have the inner resources left to cope with the present. If the people we are used to depending on are overwhelmed by their own feelings, our social support network may unravel when we need it most. Or if those around us do not share our sense of loss, they may be unable to relate to what we are experiencing. The following are a few important guidelines for those who are grieving.

**1** Recognize that each person grieves in his or her own way. Some people need to talk about their loss and to express their feelings openly, but that is not true of everyone. Giving other people the message that they are unhealthy or foolish or simply wrong because

they do not grieve the way they are “supposed” to, because they cry too much or do not cry at all, is unsupportive and unhelpful. Telling yourself this message is just as destructive. 

**2** Support the acknowledgment and acceptance of all of the thoughts and feelings that arise from the loss. Telling people that they “shouldn’t” feel what they are feeling never works. Instead, it only adds to the feelings of guilt, isolation and anger. Acknowledging and working through the feelings is a much more effective way to resolve them. 

**3** Recognize that the healing will take time. In our culture, we have somehow become uncomfortable with grief and mourning. A person who wears black after the funeral – or even at the funeral itself – is looked upon with distaste. A week of emergency leave is seen as sufficient, if not excessive. In reality, it is not uncommon for full recovery to take several months to a year. 

**4** Anticipate problems when you can. Holidays, anniversaries and birthdays may bring up memories of earlier times and acute awareness of the

*Joy and Grief*

were mingled in the cup; but there were no bitter tears: for even grief itself arose so softened, and clothed in such sweet and tender recollections, that it became a solemn pleasure, and lost all character of pain.

*Charles Dickens*

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# "AM I PARANOID, OR ARE PEOPLE AVOIDING ME?"

by Russell P. Friedman & John W. James

Even though griever seem to be walking through quicksand, they usually have a heightened awareness of what is going on around them. In particular, they are very aware of being judged, evaluated, or criticized. Unhelpful comments almost always encourage the griever to feel some way other than the way they feel. For example, don't feel sad, you should feel grateful that you had him/her for so long.

In addition to the constant fight against killer clichés, the griever starts to experience being avoided by people they know. Grievers notice that friends who know about the loss will not approach them or will talk to them and never mention the loss.

The truth is that people often do avoid grievers. Since our society has so miseducated us about loss, we are often led to believe that the griever wants and needs to be alone. Although grievers sometimes want to be alone, more often they want to be treated normally. Because we were never properly taught how to talk about the conflicting feelings caused by loss, we are often afraid to talk to our friends when they have experienced a loss. Therefore, our own fear will cause us to avoid grievers or to avoid the subject of their loss.

Fear is one of the most common responses to loss. For example, when

a spouse dies: "How can I go on without them?" Or, after a divorce: "Where will I find another mate as wonderful, as beautiful?" While fear is often the emotional response to loss, in our society, ISOLATION is frequently the behavioral reaction to the fear.

Look at the combination outlined above. People avoid grievers because they are misinformed and afraid. Grievers avoid others because they are afraid and then isolated. Is anybody talking to anyone else, and if so, are they talking about anything important to the griever?

As the result of tens of thousands of direct interactions with grieving people, we can tell you that what grievers most want and need to do is to talk about "what happened" and talk about their relationship with the person who died or to whom they were married. That does not mean that every griever will want to have a detailed conversation with everyone they meet. Nor does it mean that you always have to make yourself available to someone who may need more time than you have.

What we are suggesting is that instead of avoiding the subject of the loss that you at least acknowledge it. A simple

comment like, "I was sorry to hear about your loss," can be very helpful to a griever who may be questioning their own sanity because no one is even mentioning their loss.

For information about programs and services, write to: The Grief & Recovery® Institute, P.O. Box 461659, Los Angeles, CA 90046-1659 or call (323) 650-1234 or fax (323) 656-9248. Russell P. Friedman and John W. James are co-authors of "The Grief Recovery Handbook — The Action Program for Moving Beyond Death, Divorce, and Other Losses" (HarperPerennial, 1998).  
[www.grief-recovery.com](http://www.grief-recovery.com).

*I will love the light  
for it will show me  
the way.  
yet I will endure the  
darkness for it  
will show me the stars.*

Og Mandino, *The Greatest Salesman in the World*,  
Contributed by Tina Waters - North Carolina





# A GUIDE TO GRIEF

*This guide will help you understand the grief you and others may feel after a death, whether sudden or anticipated. We hope this guide will help you realize that these feelings are not unusual and things can get better. You are not alone.*

## The Grieving Process

Grief is painful and at times the pain seems unbearable. It is a combination of many emotions that come and go, sometimes without warning. Grieving is the period during which we actively experience these emotions. How long and how difficult the grieving period is depends on the relationship with the person who dies, the circumstances of the death, and the situation of the survivors.

## Feelings and Symptoms of Grief

Experts describe the process of grieving and the emotions of grief in various ways. The most commonly described reactions are: Shock, Denial, Anger, Guilt, Depression, Acceptance, and Growth. Some people experience the grieving process in this order. Most often, a person feels several of these emotions at the same time, perhaps in different degrees.

### Shock

If the death comes suddenly, as in an accident or murder, shock is often

the first response people feel. Even if the death is anticipated, there may be disbelief at its finality. A person may be numb, or, like a robot, be able to go through the motions of life while actually feeling little. At the same time, physical symptoms such as confusion and loss of appetite are common.

### Denial

Shock and denial are nature's way of softening the immediate blow of death. Denial can follow soon after the initial shock. People may know their loved one has died, but some part of them can't yet accept the reality of the death. It is not uncommon to fantasize that the deceased will walk through the door, as if nothing has happened. Some people leave bedrooms unchanged or make future plans as if the loved one will participate, just as in the past.

### Anger

Anger is normal. It may be directed at the deceased for leaving and causing a sense of abandonment, or at the doctors and nurses who did not do enough, or at a murderer who killed without remorse. People of faith may feel anger at God, for allowing so much pain and anguish. Anger may also be directed at oneself for not saving the life of the loved one. It can be a mild feeling or a raging irrational emotion. It can test one's faith in religion or even in the goodness of life.

### Guilt

Few survivors escape some feeling of guilt and regret. "I should have done more" are words that haunt many people. Were angry words exchanged? Most people are very creative in finding reasons for guilt. So many things could have been done differently "if only I had known."

### Sadness

Sadness is the most inevitable emotion of grief. It is normal to feel abandoned, alone and afraid. After the shock and denial have passed and the anger has been exhausted, sadness and even hopelessness may set in. A person may have little energy to do even the simplest daily chores. Crying episodes may seem endless.

### Acceptance

Time alone will not heal grief. Acknowledging the loss and experiencing the pain may free the survivor from a yearning to return to the past. Accepting life without the lost loved one may give way to a new perspective about the future. Acceptance does not mean forgetting, but rather using the memories to create a new life without the loved one. Hoping for things to be as they were may be replaced by a search for new relationships and new activities.

### Growth

Grief is a chance for personal growth. For many people, it may eventually lead to renewed energy to invest in

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new activities and new relationships. Some people seek meaning in their loss and get involved in causes or projects that help others. Some people find a new compassion in themselves as a result of the pain they have suffered. They may become more sensitive to others, thus enabling richer relationships. Others find new strength and independence they never knew they had.

### The Experience of Grief

Grieving people have two choices: they can avoid the pain and all the other emotions associated with their loss and continue on, hoping to forget. The other choice is to recognize grieving and seek healing and growth. Getting over a loss is slow, hard work. In order for growth to be possible, it is essential to allow oneself to feel all the emotions that arise, as painful as they may be, and to treat oneself with patience and kindness.

### Feel the Pain

Give into it – even give it precedence over other emotions and activities, because grief is a pain that will get in the way later if it is ignored. Realize that grief has no timetable; it is cyclical, so expect the emotions to come and go for weeks, months or even years. While a show of strength is admirable, it does not serve the need to express sadness, even when it comes out at unexpected times and places.

### Talk About Your Sorrow

Take the time to seek comfort from friends who will listen. Let them know you need to talk about your loss. People will understand, although

they may not know how to respond. If they change the subject, explain that you need to share your memories and express your sorrow.

### Forgive Yourself

Forgive yourself for all the things you believe you should have said or done. Also forgive yourself for the anger and guilt and embarrassment you may have felt while grieving.

### Eat Well and Exercise

Grief is exhausting. To sustain your energy, be sure to maintain a balanced diet. Exercise is also important in sustaining energy. Find a routine that suits you – perhaps walks or bike rides with friends, or in solitude.

### Indulge Yourself

Take naps, read a good book, listen to your favorite music, get a manicure, go to a ball game, rent a movie. Do something that is frivolous, distracting and that you personally find comforting.

### Prepare for the Holidays and Anniversaries

Many people feel especially “blue” during these periods, and the anniversary date of the death can be especially painful. Even if you think you’ve progressed, these dates may bring back some of your painful emotions. Make arrangements to be with friends and family members with whom you are comfortable.

### Get Help

Bereavement groups can help you recognize your feelings and put them in perspective. They can also help alleviate the feeling that you are alone. The experience of sharing with others who are in a similar situation

can be comforting and reassuring. Sometimes, new friendships grow through these groups – even a whole new social network that you did not have before. There are specialized groups for widowed persons, for parents who have lost a child, for victims of drunken drivers, etc. There are also groups that do not specialize. Check with your local hospice or other bereavement support groups for more information.

### Take Steps to Create a New Life for Yourself

Give yourself as much time to grieve as you need. Once you find new energy, begin to look for interesting things to do. Take courses, donate time to a cause you support, meet new people, or even find a new job. It is often tempting to try to replace the person who has been lost. Whether through adoption, remarriage, or other means, this form of reconciliation often does not work.

Reprinted courtesy of National Hospice Organization (NHO), Arlington, Virginia,  
[www.nho.org](http://www.nho.org).

## Grief Is Not...

Grief is not a mountain to be climbed, with the strong reaching the summit long before the weak.

Grief is not an athletic event, with stop watches timing our progress.

Grief is a walk through loss and pain with no competition and no time trials.

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person who is no longer there to take his or her accustomed role in the celebration. Special occasions during the first year after the loss are likely to be especially difficult, because each one is the first Thanksgiving, the first birthday, etc., without that person. By thinking ahead, you can help to modify old traditions or start new customs that both honor the past and look to the future. By the time the second year begins, you will have been through each event once already, and the new ways of doing things will probably start feeling more natural and familiar. ❁

**5** Seek professional help. Not everyone will need the expertise of a professional counselor to recover from grief. But if the circumstances of the loss seem to be more than you can handle, or if you are not sure whether what you are experiencing is “normal,” a trained counselor will be able to help you sort out these feelings. He or she will also be able to offer understanding and support in ways that your family and friends, who are locked into their own perspective, may not be able to do. For best results, I recommend looking for a counselor who is specifically trained in dealing with grief and trauma resolution. ❁

*Author Lynn Mary Karjala, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist in private practice in Roswell, Georgia. For more information, please visit her Web site at [www.karjala.com](http://www.karjala.com).*

## What is Grief?

When we form a loving bond with someone, we have set ourselves up for the pain of grief when that bond is broken. Grief is experienced psychologically, socially and physically. Grief is experienced psychologically through your mental thoughts and feelings. It is experienced socially through the interaction you have with those around you and physically through the health of your body. Your grief can best be measured and/or identified by your reactions, psychologically, socially and physically, to the loss you have suffered. Your grief may express itself in many different ways, often with disturbing and confusing feelings and emotions never before felt or experienced. These feelings and emotions may be very powerful and frightening and it is common for these feelings to occur over a very long period of time. In addition, no two people's experience will be the same.

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## Does the sudden loss of a loved one have any impact on a survivor's grief or loss?

The sudden loss of a loved one with no forewarning does complicate the grief and recovery process of the survivor. However, sudden losses, like all losses, are highly individual and will likely affect each person in very different ways. It is important to understand, though, that we cannot compare or effectively measure a person's loss. Each person's loss and the associated grief that goes with it is unique to that person. In essence, loss by sudden or unexpected death further complicates the survivor's grief process, but does not heighten nor lessen his or her overall loss.

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## Does grief ever end?

*Grief can sometimes be described as a period of intense emotional pain and suffering. You can assume that at some point in time the suffering will ease in its level of intensity. This will occur as you accommodate and integrate the loss into your new life. This does not mean that you will ever stop experiencing periods of sadness, remorse and longing for your loved one. However, it does mean that the intense acute phase of suffering will eventually come to an end as you work in resolving your personal grief.*