Understanding grief

What grief is, how it tends to change over time and what is normal.

Grief is the natural response to losing someone or something that mattered. It is not an illness, and it is not a problem to be solved.

Grief does not come in stages

You may have heard of five stages. They were never meant as steps everyone goes through in order. Real grief is messier. Feelings come in waves, sometimes several in an hour, and return when you least expect them.

Two kinds of work

Most people move back and forth between two things:

Facing the loss

- Feeling the pain and longing
- Remembering, crying, talking about them
- Looking at photos
- Visiting the grave or special places

Rebuilding life

- Dealing with practical changes
- Taking on new roles and tasks
- Having a break from grief
- Finding moments of enjoyment

Both are needed. Going between them, even within a day, is healthy. Time away from the pain is not forgetting or disloyalty. It is how people get the strength to go back to it.

What changes with time

For most people the pain does not shrink so much as life slowly grows around it. The waves come less often and with more warning. The loss stays part of you, and there is room for other things as well.

Things that are normal

- Feeling relief, anger or guilt as well as sadness
- Feeling nothing for a while
- Sensing their presence, or thinking you saw them
- Grieving differently from others in the family
- Being hit hard on anniversaries, years later

Be patient with yourself

There is no correct way to grieve and no set length of time.

The idea of moving between loss and rebuilding comes from Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut. The picture of life growing around grief comes from Lois Tonkin.

My notes and questions

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How grief can show up

Grief affects the whole person: feelings, body, mind and behaviour.

People are often frightened by the strength and variety of what they feel after a loss. All of the following are common.

Feelings

Sadness, yearning, anger, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, relief, numbness. Sometimes several at once. Sometimes none.

Body

Exhaustion, tightness in the chest or throat, a hollow stomach, aches, poor sleep, appetite changes, restlessness, getting ill more easily.

Thinking

Disbelief, confusion, poor memory and concentration, going over and over what happened, "if only".

Behaviour

Crying, or being unable to. Withdrawing, or keeping very busy. Searching for them. Avoiding reminders, or holding on to them.

Sensing them

Hearing their voice, feeling them near, dreaming of them. This is common and usually comforting.

Meaning and faith

Questioning beliefs. Asking "why?" Feeling life is pointless, or seeing what matters more clearly.

Things people rarely say out loud

- "I feel relieved, and I hate myself for it."
- "I am angry with them for leaving."
- "I cannot cry, and I think something is wrong with me."
- "I laughed today and felt terrible."
- "I am jealous of people who still have theirs."

Each of these is a normal part of grief.

Waves

Grief often comes in bursts, set off by a song, a smell, an empty chair, or nothing at all. In the early days the waves are close together. Over time there are longer gaps, though a big one can still knock you over years later.

What I have been noticing in myself

What has surprised me

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Grief: myths and facts

Common beliefs about grieving that are not true.

Myth	Fact
Grief follows five stages.	There are no fixed stages. Feelings come and go in no particular order.
You should be over it in a year.	There is no timetable. Many people find the second year harder than the first.
If you are not crying, you are not grieving.	People grieve in very different ways. Some cry a lot, some hardly at all.
Staying strong means not showing it.	Showing grief is not weakness. Children especially learn that feelings are safe when adults show theirs.
Keeping busy is the best cure.	Activity helps, in balance. Grief that is constantly outrun tends to catch up.
You have to let go to move on.	Most people stay connected to the person in a new way, and that is healthy.
Talking about them will upset people.	The bereaved are already thinking about them. Hearing their name is usually a comfort.
If you feel relief, you did not love them.	Relief is common, especially after a long illness or a difficult relationship. It sits alongside love.
Time heals.	Time alone does not. What you do with the time is what helps.

A belief about grief that has been weighing on me

Where I picked it up (family, culture, something someone said)

What I would like to believe instead

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Looking after yourself while grieving

A checklist for looking after your body, your routine and your contact with people.

Name _____ Date _____

Grieving uses a great deal of energy. You do not need to do all of these. Tick what you are managing, and circle one or two to give more attention to.

Body

- [ ] Eating something at regular times
- [ ] Drinking water
- [ ] Getting some rest, even if sleep is poor
- [ ] A little movement or fresh air each day
- [ ] Keeping alcohol low
- [ ] Seeing my GP if I am run down

Routine

- [ ] Getting up and dressed
- [ ] One small task each day
- [ ] Some structure to the week
- [ ] Putting off big decisions where I can

People

- [ ] Letting someone know how I am really doing
- [ ] Accepting offers of help
- [ ] Saying no to things I cannot face
- [ ] Time with people who do not need me to be OK

Feelings

- [ ] Letting myself cry when it comes
- [ ] Letting myself laugh when it comes
- [ ] Taking breaks from grief without guilt
- [ ] Being as kind to myself as I would be to someone else

One thing I will do for myself each day this week

What helps most at the moment

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Between loss and rebuilding

Checking your balance between facing the grief and getting on with life.

Name _____ Date _____

Healthy grieving moves back and forth between spending time with the loss and attending to the life that has to go on. Too much of one can leave you stuck: overwhelmed by pain, or running from it. Tick what you have been doing and add anything else.

Time with the loss

- [ ] Remembering
- [ ] Crying
- [ ] Talking about them
- [ ] Looking at photos
- [ ] Visiting places

Time rebuilding

- [ ] New tasks and roles
- [ ] Practical matters
- [ ] Taking a break
- [ ] Seeing people
- [ ] Small pleasures

Lately I have been mostly...

0 — 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8 — 9 — 10

Facing the loss — Rebuilding

What do I notice about my balance?

Do I avoid one side? What am I afraid would happen if I went there?

One thing I could do this week on the side I have been neglecting

Based on the dual process model of Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut.

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Staying connected to someone who has died

Ways of keeping a bond with the person, and what you want to remember.

Name _____ Date _____

It used to be thought that grieving meant letting go. Most bereaved people find the opposite: they keep a bond, in a new form, and it helps.

Ways people stay connected

- [ ] Talking to them, out loud or in my head
- [ ] Keeping something of theirs close
- [ ] Visiting a place that was theirs
- [ ] Cooking their recipes, playing their music
- [ ] Marking their birthday or anniversary
- [ ] Telling stories about them
- [ ] Asking "what would they say about this?"
- [ ] Carrying on something they cared about
- [ ] Looking at photos and videos
- [ ] Writing to them

What I most want to remember about them

What they gave me or taught me that I carry with me

The ways I already stay connected

A way I would like to try

How I want them to be part of my life from here

The idea of continuing bonds comes from Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman and Steven Nickman (1996).

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A letter to someone I have lost

For the things that did not get said.

There are often things left unsaid when someone dies. Writing a letter gives you a way to say them. Nobody else needs to read it. You do not have to do it in one go.

Prompts, if you want them

- What I miss most about you is...
- A memory I keep coming back to...
- Something I never told you...
- I am sorry for...
- I forgive you for... or, I am still angry about...
- Thank you for...
- Since you died, I have...
- What I want you to know is...

Dear

Afterwards

- You might keep the letter, read it at the grave, burn it, or put it away in a box.
- Notice how you feel. Give yourself some quiet time.
- You can write again, whenever there is more to say.

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Memories worth keeping

Gathering what you do not want to lose.

Name _____ Date _____

Many people fear they will forget. Writing things down keeps them safe. Fill this in over time, alone or with family. Some answers will make you smile and some will hurt.

Their name, and what I called them

What they looked like, sounded like, smelled like

Things they always said

What made them laugh

What they were good at, and what they were hopeless at

A story that sums them up

My favourite memory of us together

What I learned from them

What I want other people to know about them

You could add photos and keep these pages in a folder or box.

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A plan for hard days

Anniversaries, birthdays, holidays and other days you are dreading.

Name _____ Date _____

The lead-up to a significant day is often worse than the day itself. Having a plan, even a loose one, gives you something to hold on to. You can change it on the day.

The day I am thinking about

What I expect to find hardest

How I would like to mark it, if at all

☐ A visit ☐ A meal ☐ A candle ☐ A walk ☐ Their music ☐ Something they loved

Who I want to be with

What I want to avoid, or say no to

What I will tell people about what I need

Something gentle for myself that day

If it gets too much, I will...

Afterwards: how it went, and what I would keep or change next time

There is no right way to spend these days. Ignoring it completely, doing something big, or anything in between are all fine.

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