Coping with Loss

A lifetime of memories
A legacy of hope

Coping with the Loss of a Loved One

The loss of someone special can be one of the most painful events we experience. As we struggle to accept our loss, it's natural to feel powerful and conflicting emotions, such as pain, fear, sadness, and even anger.

While coping with the loss of a loved one takes time, healing begins when you are able to face your grief and realize you are not alone.

Family Changes

The death of a loved one affects the entire family. Each member develops his or her own way of coping. Cultural differences, spiritual values, and family dynamics all influence a family's reaction to such a loss.

Being able to grieve together and support each other is essential in helping the entire family heal. While each person will experience the loss differently and may have different needs, it is important for family members to remain open and honest with each other.

The loss of a family member means family roles will change. Your family will want to discuss the effects of this change and who will do what activities. This time of redefining roles can be stressful for everyone, so it is important to be gentle and patient with each other.

When Your Parent Dies

No matter how old you are or where you are in life, the death of your mother or father will deeply affect you. It is only natural to feel pain, fear, and sadness after losing one of the most influential people in your life.

How you grieve depends on a number of factors, including your age, gender, religious beliefs, previous experience with death, relationship with your parent, and whether the death was expected or a shock. Regardless, there are three common reactions to losing a parent:

- Shock
- Denial
- Guilt

After the initial shock fades, you will experience something called secondary loss. During this phase of grieving, you may think of family milestones you won't be able to share with your parent.

A parent's death may also remind you of your own mortality. Again, allowing yourself to grieve may help you let go of someone who has meant so much to you.

When Your Child Dies

The death of a child is perhaps the most devastating loss anyone can experience. It destroys our sense of the natural order of life, forcing parents, siblings, and other family members or friends to face a seemingly unbearable emotional experience.

If you recently lost your child, you may be experiencing shock, denial, depression, and anger. You may also feel guilty for being alive when your child is not. You may feel especially guilty that you could not prevent your child's death.

After losing a child, both parents often expect to react the same way, since they are both dealing with the same loss. But everyone grieves differently and you may find it hard to talk about this loss. Be sure to allow time to talk together, cry together, or simply be there for each other.

There is no time limit for grief, but if you are not coping well, you may wish to seek counseling or find a support group. Ask your minister, doctor, or funeral director for a referral.

Grieving does get easier. While your loved one is no longer with you, the memory of this cherished person will live on.

When Your Spouse or Partner Dies

If your partner has died, you will likely be overwhelmed with strong emotions, including sorrow, anger, and loneliness. You may find yourself thinking all or most of the time about your lost partner and how he or she died.

As the reality of your partner's death sinks in, you may have to accept yourself in a different way. You may now be a single parent, raising children alone. Or maybe the death of your spouse has left you in a financial tight spot.

The hardest change will be accepting that the life you planned together has ended. You must now find your own life again after living with a close companion for so long.

In time, you will adjust to your new life and your grief will decrease. As you accept the death and begin a new chapter in your life, you will always have memories of the life you shared with your partner.

Talking to Children about Death

When we lose a loved one, it is often hard to comfort others – even our children. Parents often avoid talking to their children about death because they think it will upset them. But talking about death can help children deal with their fears.

Children react to death in different ways than adults, and sometimes they say things that seem odd or inappropriate. It is important to remember that your child is simply trying to understand and accept what has happened.

Coping with Loss

If you or someone you know has lost a loved one, here are some ways to help you through this difficult time:

- Give yourself permission to feel pain and loss.
- Be patient with the process and avoid unrealistic expectations.
- Accept that you need to grieve in your own way and in your own time.
- Get support. You can call the American Cancer Society anytime, day or night, at 1-800-227-2345.
- Maintain your normal lifestyle. Avoid major life changes within the first year of bereavement.
- Eat well and exercise. Physical activity releases tension.
- Avoid excess alcohol. Alcohol is a depressant that will make you feel worse.
- Forgive yourself if there were unresolved issues between you and your lost loved one.
- Do something in memory of your loved one.
- Join a bereavement support group. The American Cancer Society can help you find one by calling 1-800-227-2345.
- Talk to your local funeral director, who can also provide resources and suggestions on local bereavement and support groups.

A Place to Turn

The National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) and the American Cancer Society are continuing to work together to help families cope with the loss of a loved one to cancer and to increase public awareness about cancer prevention and early detection. The NFDA is committed to making a difference in the fight against a disease that affects millions of Americans.

The American Cancer Society works every day to ensure that one day, we see a world where cancer no longer threatens the lives of those we love. No matter who you are, we're in your corner when and where you need us.

We **save lives** and create more birthdays by helping you stay well, helping you get well, by finding cures, and by fighting back.

cancer.org | 1.800.227.2345

nfda.org | 1.800.228.6332

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