

COPING WITH THE LOSS OF LOVED ONES

It is basically assured that at some point in your life, someone close to you will die. Recognized as such a commonly-experienced and potentially profoundly-impacting event in our society, entire literary and cinematic tropes are dedicated to the character development of a central protagonist based on their (in)ability to cope with the loss of someone whom they had loved; see Batman, Spiderman, William Wallace (*Braveheart*), the Punisher, Darth Vader, and pretty much every Disney/Pixar main character. The effect of death and loss is thus portrayed as a motivating factor for these individuals, while also hindering their ability to revert to a “normal” mode of life.

How we respond to the loss of loved ones seems to make all the difference. When we bury grief down inside our minds, it’s akin to cleaning your room by shoving all your dirty clothes and loose items into the closet; not only does this not address the problem, but it also assures that the emotions will fester and ultimately require revisitation (subsequently hindering your ability to obtain anything from said closet later on). Grieving is often a painful process; however, just like most everything which hurts, it has the potential to make us stronger, more resilient, and exponentially more capable of helping others.



So whether you lost someone recently, or you’re still hurting from the death of a close friend or family member from years ago, the following suggestions may assist you—not to “move on”—but to acknowledge the grief, to address the thoughts and emotions, and to find renewed strength.

- **Make time to grieve.** If you find your thoughts regularly digress to the loss of a loved one, it may be helpful to set aside a brief time during the day to focus solely on the person’s memory; find a quiet place to think about the person, and the significance and *meaning* of their life.
- **Focus on the positive impact of the person’s life.** Many feelings can accompany grief: sadness, anger, injustice, helplessness, and mental anguish, to name a few. Instead of reveling in these negative emotions, turn your attention to the positive experiences you shared with the person, celebrate the happy memories, and commemorate the impact they had on your life.
- **Rely on the important people in your life for support.** We have wakes and funeral ceremonies, in part, to rally around others during time of grief. If you are up to it, talk with others who share your loss, or think about meeting with someone like myself or the chaplain.
- **Remember that everyone grieves differently.** There is no “timeline” for grieving, nor is there a “right” way to do it—although there *is* a wrong way. Resist pressure to conform to a prescriptive pattern of grief (i.e. the “Five Stages” are merely *common expressions* of grief, not a linear pathway), and focus instead on your own needs and methods to address the loss. For some, death is a normal life experience, and for others it’s a spiritual dilemma—meaning we need to also be sensitive to, and supportive of, how others around us grieve their losses.

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