

# Good Grief

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*I attended a funeral last week. The sudden death of my friend's husband left family and friends with shattered dreams and broken hearts. Losing a loved one precipitates a journey of grieving. And although this experience of loss is nearly universal, it is also exquisitely personal.*



[Photo Credit](#)

*As my heart aches for my friend, I reflect on the process of grief and some of the things I have learned along the way from my own personal experiences of loss buttressed by my professional training.*

**1. Grief is a normal and healthy response to loss.** Neither something pathological nor something to “get over,” grief is a process. In the wake of loss, grieving is painful and difficult, but it is also good and healthy. It calls on us to metabolize the departure of a loved one and internalize the memories and history. It is an essential, if disquieting, affair that helps carry the relationship forward, transforming what was into something altogether new and different.

**2. You can't hurry grief.** In our society that is both [obsessed with happiness](#) and often in a hurry, sometimes it can feel like there is no space for grieving. But we fail to grieve at our own peril. Years ago, Kubler-Ross described the [five stages of grief](#): denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These experiences are all part of the grieving process, but grieving does not happen in a stepwise fashion, and there is no perfect way to grieve nor a preordained sequence or time frame. We grieve at our own pace, and each loss will be a different journey. No one consciously chooses to unnecessarily prolong or intensify grief but racing in the opposite direction and minimizing the pain, can paradoxically result in a protracted process.

**3. You don't get over it; you get on with it.** One of the understandings that has been helpful to me when I have lost loved ones is coming to realize that although the person may be gone from my daily life, the relationship is not. In time, and years after losing a loved one, it can be healing to find that we can carry the relationship with us in ways that are meaningful even after the person has departed. In the Jewish tradition, one wishes for a person's memory to be “for a blessing.” This is an affirmation of a person's continued presence in

our lives – in our thoughts and in our deeds – long after they are physically gone.

**4. Prolonged grief disorder.** But sometimes we can get tangled up in grief in ways that causes considerable suffering and impairment. So much so, that in the new version of the World Health Organization ICD-11, this syndrome of complicated grief has been included for the first time as a mental disorder. According the ICD-11, this condition is called [Prolonged Grief Disorder](#) and its core symptoms include longing for and preoccupation with the deceased, along with emotional distress and significant functional impairment that persists for more than six months after the loss of a loved one. Columbia professor and expert on complicated grief, [Dr. Katherine Shear](#), reports that prolonged or protracted grief is most common among those who have lost a romantic partner or a child, or when a death is sudden or violent.

**5. What's a friend to do?** Bear witness. Be present. Accept that your loved one who is grieving is exactly where they need to be. There is nothing to fix. Stay away from attempts to take away the pain by saying things like “everything happens for a reason” or “God works in mysterious ways.” When we can provide community support and can communicate that there is time and space for grief, the unspoken message is that we have hope and confidence that our loved has what is needed—not to move on but to move forward. If we are concerned that our loved one is languishing, and perhaps suffering from prolonged grief disorder, it is important to know that resources exist. The book on grieving by Megan Devine, [It's Okay that You're Not Okay](#), is especially insightful, and we also have psychotherapy interventions designed specifically for prolonged grief disorder that are [helpful and effective](#).

*Life is never the same after a loved one dies. Grief, in its restless searching, can help us reckon with a world that is different in ways that we never anticipated or imagined. At its best, grieving enriches our lives, helps us become more human and compassionate, and helps us accept that “[some things cannot be fixed, but they can be carried.](#)” May grief be a friend to my friend and to all who mourn.*