

Understanding and attending to my grief



Experiences of loss and grief can be very challenging. This factsheet offers some guidance to help you understand your grief response. It also provides ideas on how you might care for yourself as you navigate the changes in your life.

What is grief?

Grief is a normal and natural response to the hurt we feel following a major change in our lives, such as the death of someone we love, separation or divorce, or a natural disaster. It affects our emotions as well as having a physical impact on our bodies. Grief challenges the way we understand ourselves and the world, including our relationships and spirituality. The experience of grief may require us to embark on a personal journey of learning new things about ourselves and different ways to view life.

How do we express grief?

Grief is experienced in unique and personal ways. Some of us openly express our hurt, while others withdraw. It is important to remember that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Here are some common grief reactions:

Emotions I may feel ...

- anxiety, fretfulness and feeling emotionally overwhelmed
- anger, frustration or disillusionment
- sadness

Thoughts I may have ...

- disbelief
- confusion
- sense of presence or detachment
- preoccupation

Behaviours I may show ...

- searching for what is gone
- difficulty concentrating or undertaking usual tasks
- restless over-activity
- absentmindedness
- visiting places and carrying mementos
- avoiding reminders

Physical reactions I may experience ...

- sleep and appetite changes
- tightness in chest and throat and breathlessness
- lack of energy

The grief process

In our Seasons for Growth work we have found J. William Worden's grief theory very helpful for making sense of the journey through grief. Worden has identified that the grief process involves four key tasks. We have adapted these slightly to take account of the wide range of losses we experience in life in addition to bereavement:

- **to accept the reality of the loss**
- **to process the pain of grief**
- **to adjust to a changed world after the loss**
- **to find an enduring connection with what has been lost while embarking on a new life**

The four tasks are not steps or stages. Although time is an important healer, we do not passively move through the tasks. Actively acknowledging and engaging with each task may help and it is likely that you will revisit and reprocess these tasks over time.



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Understanding the grief process, is an important step in adjusting to life after your loss. Understanding what is required helps to make the grief journey a little less bewildering. But how might we engage with the tasks in a meaningful way? How might we make the shift from a passive experience of grief ('this has happened to me') to the active engagement ('what does this require of me?') highlighted by Worden's tasks?

One small, practical step you might begin with is identifying and acknowledging each emotion you are feeling. Rather than trying to push away or ignore uncomfortable feelings, allow them to 'be,' and then direct your attention towards considering how to best manage these when they arise. For instance, what steps can you take when sadness consumes you at work? What strategies might you create for yourself when your frustration feels overwhelming?

Starting with your feelings in this way may help to give you the energy and awareness to take another small step – to start to think about the areas of your life that you can influence as distinct from those you can't. Rather than focusing on the 'if onlys,' this will help you to direct your efforts and emotional energy towards the choices, actions and decisions that will help you live your life in a way that is meaningful to you today.

To navigate this complex and challenging time, you need to gather yourself some extra support. This might include:

- **time** – the opportunity to take some 'time out' from your responsibilities to focus on your grief or to refresh yourself
- **safe space** – spaces or places where you can safely (for yourself and others) experience different emotions (such as sadness, anger, fear, guilt and humour)
- **a companion** at least one friend, relative or counsellor who you can talk openly with to help make sense of what has happened and regularly reflect upon your reactions without feeling judged
- **support network** – a wider network of people you can call upon to help in a range of contexts – including the practical aspects of daily life

It is very important to be able to accept offers of help from family, friends and neighbours. Don't be afraid to ask for the type of support that would be most helpful for you. If finding time for yourself is a challenge, ask someone to cover your responsibilities for an afternoon. If a messy house is compounding your sense of despair, ask a relative to give you a hand in restoring some sense of how you'd like the place to be. Asking for help from others is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign of strength – a positive step that you can choose to take.

Further support – our programs

Seasons for Growth is an evidence-based education program that gently helps children, young people and adults learn about the grief process. Children, young people and adults benefit from the opportunity to learn how death, family separation, natural disasters or other significant change and loss events may impact on their lives. The Seasons for Growth Program provides an opportunity for participants to learn the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to understand and respond well to such experiences.

Seasons for Growth has a program to support adults and four age-appropriate program levels to support children and young people aged 6-18 years. All levels of the program have flexibility to cater for participants with different learning needs. The sessions incorporate a range of age-appropriate activities involving drawing, stories, discussion, music and journal activities.

MacKillop Seasons train and support professionals to deliver our small group programs in schools and community organisations.

