

GRIEF GUIDE

To help you cope with your loss



JOAN AND STANFORD
ALEXANDER
JFS
Houston
Light • Hope • Help







Table of Contents

Welcome	4
Who should use this guide?	4
How should I use this guide?	4
PART 1 Where to start	11
The myth of a timeline	11
How you may feel	12
Common grief reactions	12
Coping with grief	15
Using your support network	15
Talk to a therapist	15
Find a support group	15
Take care of yourself	16
Be prepared for significant dates	17
PART 2 Traumatic loss	19
What is traumatic loss?	20
Grieving a traumatic loss	20
What does traumatic grief look like?	21
Death by suicide	23
Death by overdose	25
PART 3 Parenting and grief	26
Parenting a grieving child	26
Parenting a grieving child with intellectual differences	27
PART 4 Supporting those grieving	29
How to be supportive	29
Steps to being a supporter	29
Supporting adults with intellectual differences through grief	30
The 11 tenets of companioning	31
PART 5 Other types of grief	34
Loss of a pet	34
REFERENCES	36
Glossary of the terms used in this guide	37
RESOURCES	38

Welcome.

Dear Reader,

Before reading this guide, we would like to acknowledge your willingness to learn more about grief as you process your loss or support someone through theirs.

Grief is a labyrinth of physical and emotional reminders of loss. Grief is not linear or bound by stages, there are good days and bad days, and everyone's grief is as unique as the person who died.

We hope this guide is helpful on your journey.

Take what you need and leave the rest behind.

With our wishes that this guide will offer you some comfort and strength,

**Behavioral and Mental
Health Services Team**

ALEXANDER JEWISH FAMILY SERVICE

Who should use this guide?

This guide is a resource for those that have experienced the death of someone in their lives. It is also a helpful resource for supporting family members or friends while grieving.

The information gathered in this guide is a culmination of the experience and recommendations from grief experts in the mental health field and individuals who have experienced loss.

How should I use this guide?

Please feel free to read the guide in its entirety or skip around to what is important to you. Then, refer to the information when you have a question or give it to a friend as a helpful resource.

Much of this information is brief and specific.

We have also included blank spaces for you to jot down your thoughts, draw pictures, or paste in photos, stickers, or anything important to you. This is a helpful way for you to remember the things that seem most helpful and to jot down questions, thoughts, concepts, or ideas that you want to explore further.

This booklet is for you to use in a way that best suits your needs at the moment, so we encourage you to be creative and experiment with different ways of using and interacting with the guide.



Below is an overview of what you will find in each section of the guide. There is no need to read the guide in any particular order, so feel free to explore in whatever order works best for you.

Part 1 – In the beginning. Insight into what to expect when you are grieving, how to ask for help, and ways you can support yourself.

Questions I may want to explore:

1. Who are my trusted individuals?
2. What are some ways I can reward myself for when I've done something uneasy (like asking for help or sitting with my sadness, etc.)?

Part 2 – Traumatic loss. Death by suicide, overdose, murder, or an accident can leave the survivor with many unanswered questions. In addition, there are often unique and intense feelings of guilt and anger that come with traumatic loss. This section focuses on your experiences and how you can support yourself or your family after a traumatic death.

Questions I may want to explore:

1. How can I be kind to myself/others?
2. In what way do I express my feelings?

Part 3 – Parenting and grief. This section focuses on how children experience grief depending on their age and stage of development and what parents can do to support the entire family.

Questions I may want to explore:

1. How does grief typically look at different developmental stages (early childhood, school-age, adolescence), and what behaviors might parents expect?
2. What strategies can parents use to create a supportive environment where children feel safe expressing their grief?

Part 4 – Supporting someone grieving.

This section covers tips on supporting and acknowledging the uncomfortable feelings that come with bearing witness to grief.

Questions I may want to explore:

1. To what extent do I feel comfortable supporting others?
2. How do I set healthy boundaries to prevent compassion fatigue while supporting others grieving?

“Grief is not a disorder, a disease or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve.”

Earl Grollman



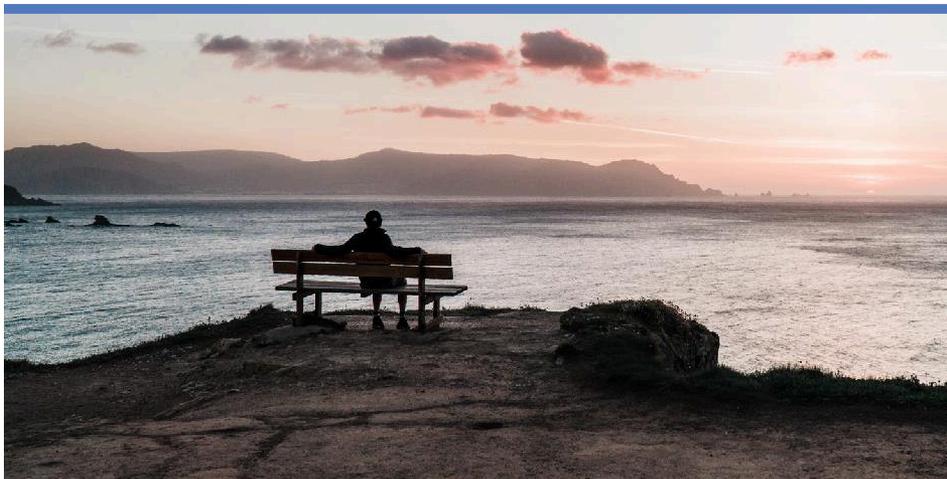
How people grieve

Grief is as unique as you are, and as individual as a single leaf. Each person will be affected in his or her own way because everyone is different – even in the same family. Each has had their own relationship with the person who has died, their own experience of other losses and differing levels of support available.

People also have their own ways of expressing feelings. Some find it helpful to share feelings and thoughts. Some find it very hard to cry or to put into words how they are feeling: it doesn't mean that they are not as distressed as someone who cannot stop crying.

In your grieving, you may find that other people tell you how you are or what you should be feeling, even suggesting how to grieve. Although well meaning, only you can find your own grieving path by listening to yourself and remembering there is no right way to be feeling or grieving.

When someone dies suddenly and unexpectedly, you may experience an overwhelming tangle of feelings and thoughts that seem to occur simultaneously. Please know that everyone grieves and feels emotions in their own way. You may feel a range of emotions at the same time or you may be overwhelmed by a single emotion such as sadness. The range of emotions each mourner feels is also individual.



Tasks of Mourning

Models of grieving are numerous. The theory of stages of grief first introduced by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross has now transitioned to the “tasks of mourning,” written by William Worden. We offer his model as a possible framework for understanding your grieving process.

Worden suggests there are four tasks of mourning. The idea behind the model is that grief is painful work that requires active participation on the part of the mourner and those who want to help him or her. He emphasizes these are in no particular order and that people may need to revisit certain tasks over time. Worden writes that grief is not linear, and that it is difficult to determine a timeline for completing the grief tasks. What are Worden’s suggested tasks?

Task 1: To accept the reality of the loss

Task 2: To work through the pain of grief

Task 3: To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing

Task 4: To find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life

Task 1: Accepting the Reality of the Loss

The first task can be both simple and complex. There are basic ways one can accept the reality of a loss: going through the rituals of a funeral or memorial, beginning to speak about (and think about) the person in past tense, etc.

On a more complex level, there is accepting the reality of the significance of the loss. For example, one may speak of someone in the past tense and accept their death but may downplay the significance of their relationship with that person, denying the impact the loss will have. On a basic level they may have accepted the reality of the loss, but on a deeper level they will not have accomplished this task until they have fully accepted the depth of the relationship and correlating impact.

Another common struggle with this task is around acceptance of the mechanism of the death. A death by suicide or overdose, may present challenges to accomplishing this task if family or friends are unable to accept the reality of the mechanism of the death.

Task 2: Working through the Pain of Grief

Task two is to work through the pain of grief. Rather than attempting to identify all the emotions of grief that one may experience and need to work through, Worden's model acknowledges that each person and each loss will mean working through a range of different emotions. From sadness, fear, loneliness, despair, hopelessness, and anger to guilt, blame, shame, relief, and countless others, there are many emotions you as a griever will contend with.

What is important in this task is acknowledging, talking about, and understanding these complex emotions in order to work through them. The danger, of course, is denying one's feelings and avoiding them. This tendency can be exacerbated by society's discomfort with the feelings that accompany grief, so the griever may feel like they shouldn't feel, or acknowledge, these difficult emotions.

Task 3: Adjusting to an Environment without the Deceased

Task three is adjusting to the environment in which the deceased is missing. Worden acknowledges that this task can also mean very different things to people depending on the relationship to the person who has died, as well as the roles that are impacted by the loss.

This readjustment happens over an extended period, and can require internal, external, and spiritual adjustments. It may take a significant period of time just to realize the different roles the loved one performed, or internal and spiritual adjustments that are required. This can be especially difficult for those who may need to learn a wide array of new skills and tasks ranging from bill paying, parenting, and taking care of the home, to environmental changes such as living alone, doing things alone and redefining the self without another person.

This can also mean adjusting to a new spiritual environment, which may have been changed by the experience of the death. This task requires developing the necessary skills to move confidently forward in the changed environments – internal, external, and spiritual.

Task 4: Finding Enduring Connection

Finally, task four is to find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new life. This task asks you to find an appropriate, ongoing connection in your emotional life with the person who has died, while allowing you to continue living.

Like the other tasks, this can mean varying things to different grievors. But it often means allowing for sad thoughts and memories, while beginning to meaningfully engage in things that bring pleasure, new experiences, or new relationships.

For Worden, *not accomplishing this task is to not live. It is the sense that life stopped when the person died: that one is not able to resume life in a meaningful way with a different sense of connection to the person who has died. This last task can take a long time and be one of the most difficult to accomplish.*

“Tasks of Mourning” adapted from the writings of William Worden

Reflection Notes:

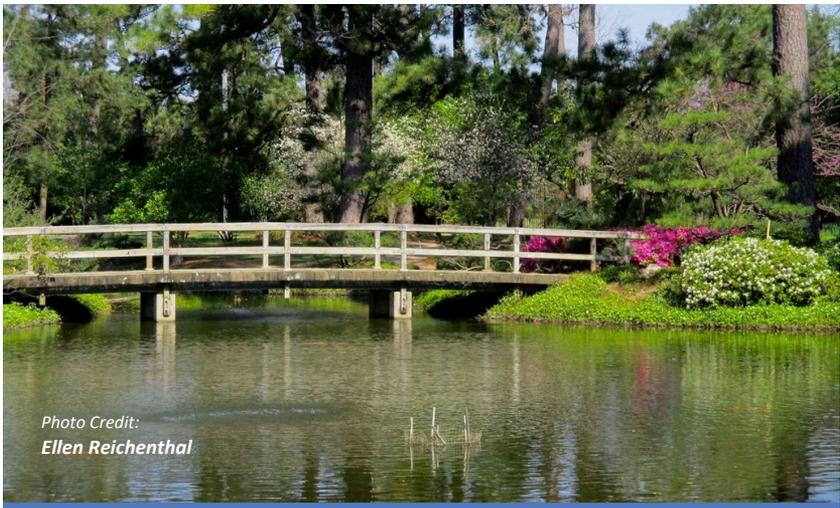


Photo Credit:
Ellen Reichenthal

PART 1

Where to Start

A guide for the newly grieving person.

Grief has no timeline, and the theories around stages, phases, or processes of grief may not apply to you. This guide will help inform you about what to expect when you are grieving. It is important to note that your grief is unique, and what you experience is also unique to you. The circumstances of the death you have experienced, and your relationship with the person who died influence how you grieve. Many of the emotions and reactions to grief are natural, and there is hope that you will begin a new way of living with grief.

The Myth of a Timeline.

Two terms used when we experience the death of someone are grief and mourning.

Mourning refers to the rituals and actions we participate in when someone dies. Many scholars refer to mourning as something we pass through, or stages we follow. The rituals around death vary from religion to religion and across cultures. Some examples of mourning rituals include hosting a wake, sitting shivah, holding a vigil, etc. Throughout this guide, we focus more on grief.

Grief is the response to death, including feelings, behaviors, and reactions to the loss. The difference is that mourning is an action while grief is a reaction.

Grief does not follow a timeline and will potentially arise throughout your life. Grief reactions may occur when something we experience activates a memory – they can occur on holidays, birthdays, or anniversaries, or when you hear a song, smell a familiar smell, or see a photo of the person that has died. The grief reaction's intensity can vary depending on coping strategies, support, and the length of time since the person died. Unfortunately, we never stop grieving, but the intensity of the grief is what changes.

How you may feel.



When someone significant to you dies, the experiences and feelings are unique to you and your relationship with the deceased. Your physical and mental health, support network, and the type of death the person experienced also influence how you will grieve. The following is a list of some common experiences you may have.

Physical Reactions	Emotional/Behavioral Reactions
Exhaustion/Fatigue Headaches Muscle tension in your body or chest Restlessness Upset stomach/Nausea Gaining or losing weight Increase or decrease in appetite Difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much Crying or sobbing Heaviness in your chest Digestive difficulties	Sadness Anger Guilt Self-blame Numbness Depression Helplessness Aggression Anxiety Frustration Irritability Fear Longing for the loved one Distress Hopelessness Shock
Mental/Cognitive Reactions	Other Reactions
Confusion Forgetfulness Lack of motivation Distractibility Rumination of the loss Nightmares Suicidal thoughts Intolerance Denial Avoidance	Difficulty with relationships Neglecting hygiene/self-care Difficulty with faith Preoccupied with “why” Loneliness

(Source – Archer, Wordon, Mughal, 1999, Taylor & Frances/Routledge)

Things that may help manage grief reactions:

Rest - Try to establish a regular time for going to bed and waking up. You may need more rest now than you typically would. Establish a bedroom environment that will help you feel grounded and calm before bed.

Make Lists - Feeling overwhelmed can make keeping track of dates, appointments, and your to-do list difficult. Try making a daily list and setting reminders to help keep track of what is needed. Also, consider sharing important dates/appointments with a trusted friend and relative who can help with the reminders.

Exercise - Try to move your body every day. It does not have to be strenuous; even a short walk can help. Try to set realistic goals and gradually add on as you feel ready. Any amount is totally OK in the beginning.

Ask for Help - If certain tasks feel too heavy and overwhelming, ask a friend for help. Friends often want to help but feel at a loss for how. Asking for help can provide you and your friend with some relief.

Give Yourself Permission to Not Be OK - Grief can come in waves, and some days may feel heavier than others. Allow yourself to feel sad, angry, numb, or anything in between without judgment. You don't have to be strong all the time or "move on" quickly. It's okay to take things one day--or even one moment--at a time. Giving yourself permission to not be okay creates space for healing and reminds you that every emotion you experience is a valid part of your grief journey.

What can help me when I'm grieving?

If you are ever concerned about what is happening or feel like you are having too intense of a reaction, seeking out a professional such as a social worker or psychologist can help develop coping strategies and provide a safe, nurturing environment in which to grieve. If your physical symptoms give you concern, speak to your physician.

Managing My Feelings

Grounding exercises are helpful for many situations where you find yourself becoming overwhelmed or distracted by distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings. It can be helpful to become familiar with some of these exercises and practice using them before they are needed so – if the need arises – you feel prepared.

Let's try this grounding exercise:

What is around you? You may experience moments where you suddenly feel slammed, overwhelmed, stuck, or heavy. In those moments, it feels like it's difficult to breathe or focus. A technique to try in these moments is to describe everything around you using all five senses.

Name two things you see ...

Name two things you smell...

Name two things you hear...

Name two things you taste...

Name two things your hands touch...

Perhaps you see a yellow chair or smell fresh-cut grass or hear a dog barking or taste the coffee you just had or feel the soft woolen fabric from your shirt. This will bring your focus to the present moment and slowly bring your body out of the negative feelings.



Coping with Grief

Below are some coping strategies and recommendations that have been effective in dealing with grief reactions.

Use Your Support Network

Identifying those who are supportive is helpful during any period of grieving. During the early stages of grief, relying on others may feel burdensome but provides much-needed space for moving through the process. Close family, friends, and even coworkers are essential to coping with grief and prevent us from becoming isolated, which can exacerbate grief reactions.

When asking for help, try to be clear about your needs and set good boundaries. Consider how you would help someone in your situation and reflect that back to those who are available. Grieving is about relationships, those that want to help do so out of concern and care.

The key to coping is being able to ask for help and accepting it when you are ready. If you have a friend who may benefit from some education on how to support someone who is grieving, you can direct them to Part 4.

Talk to a Therapist

You may have noticed that there are a lot of possible grief reactions. It is natural to feel like you may be losing your mind and can't even determine a place to start. A therapist is an ideal resource to provide you with a nurturing, judgment-free environment for you to grieve. They can help you explore your emotions and be a neutral person who can be empathetic.

Find a Support Group

During the initial days of mourning, support can be most helpful when coming from your closest relationships. Friends, family, coworkers, and fellow congregants can be supportive during much of this time. However, confiding in your support network can sometimes be difficult for any number of reasons.

Finding an outside support group provides a space for grieving with others who have experienced similar deaths. Support groups are not the same as a process or therapy group. The intent of a support group is to receive support from others and have an opportunity to provide support. Getting started with a support group is as easy as going online. In addition to in-person support groups, there are virtual grief support groups, websites, online meetings, and resources available.



Below is a list of considerations when selecting a support group either online or in person.

- Groups should be confidential and recognize that everyone grieves differently.
- Groups provide space for everyone involved. Equal time is allowed for those who wish to share.
- Healthy groups will recognize that all feelings and experiences are valuable.
- While it can be tempting at times, advice is rarely given and often discouraged.
- If the group is facilitated by a trained professional or volunteer, they should be able to properly keep the group focused on grief and provide a safe place for all to share.

Take Care of Yourself

Grief can be raw, painful, and messy. It is important during times of grief to take care of yourself, but sometimes it can feel impossible. Take small steps and do as much as you can. Self-care is a crucial part of the healing process and can help ease the suffering of the mind, body, and spirit. As every individual's grief is unique, so is their path to healing from a loss. What works for someone else may not work for you and that's okay.

We encourage you to seek out and find what self-care tips work for you. Here are a couple of thoughts about how to get started:

- First, give yourself space to tend to your family's needs, such as doctor appointments and maintaining your home, daily hygiene, or other regular routines.
- Second, give yourself a "grief break." Staying busy to keep your mind occupied is healthy. What makes distraction unhealthy is avoiding the emotions for extended periods. No matter what, grief is going to happen, but taking a break is perfectly reasonable.



Be Prepared for Important Dates

Birthdays, holidays, and anniversaries are some of the most challenging times for a grieving person. These dates are reminders of good times and difficult times. During the first year in particular, every significant date can come with a new round of grief reactions. Unfortunately, each year after can have a dose of grief. This is sometimes referred to as an anniversary reaction. Keeping these dates in mind and preparing yourself will help you cope with these grief reminders.

Here are some tips to prepare for important dates:

Prepare: Make a plan for the day to ensure that you are taking care of yourself. Let your support network know the day will be difficult. Reach out to those who are helpful. Plan to spend some time reflecting and acknowledge that the day will be difficult. Going into these days without a plan can leave you vulnerable to more intense emotions.

Traditions: Consider what you would be doing if the person was still alive or what they would want you to do on this day without them. Consider making new traditions such as watching their favorite movie or baking something that they always enjoyed.

Emotions: Allow yourself to grieve. Some of these important dates can be truly sad days. When we fight emotions, it can become more distressing. Try to prepare yourself for this day by practicing some of your coping strategies. If it gets too intense, seek out some support. You don't have to grieve alone on these days.

Connect: It can seem easier to stay away from others because you may be worried about making them sad. While this is a natural way of thinking about your grief, it is not the healthiest way to cope with difficult days. Instead, connect with friends or family. Let them know that you could use their support.

Avoid: As mentioned earlier, avoiding reminders is not always a bad strategy. For those who have experienced traumatic loss, grief reminders of the death can be debilitating. Making plans to get through the day safely with distractions can help make the day pass with a bit of ease.

What are my important dates? How can I prepare?

A special note about grief reminders: Reminders of the person who died will happen often. It occurs at any moment that a habit of connection occurred. For example, when you order take-out and there is one less meal, when you are heading home from work and want to tell your loved one about your day, or when you are faced with managing finances for the first time. These are all reminders that, over time, become less intense.

What is important is to recognize that the person that died is still an important part of your life. Grief reminders are just that, reminders of the person we love and not only the person we lost.

Seek out additional support or consider seeing a mental health professional if your grief impacts your daily functioning and quality of life after several months have passed.

What are some of my grief reminders?

PART 2

Traumatic Loss

Some Thoughts about Language Used in this Guide

In this guide we will discuss many different types of grief that we may experience depending on the circumstances of the individual that died and their relationship to us.

One of the types of grief we will address is the grief that is experienced after someone dies by suicide. In this guide we use phrases such as “died by” suicide” or “lost their life to” suicide” rather than “committed” suicide. The word “commit” is often associated with something that is considered a sin or a crime. Using neutral phrases like “died by” suicide helps strip away the shame, blame, and stigma.

In this guide we also use “people first” language. We believe that putting the person before the condition shows respect for the individual, reinforcing the fact that their condition does not define them. As a result, we say things like, “they are experiencing suicidal thoughts” or “they are living with a mental illness” or “they struggle with addiction.”

We also don’t believe that suicide is a choice. Viewing suicide as a choice can promote the misunderstanding that people who die by suicide are selfish. Individuals who are having suicidal thoughts are experiencing the symptoms of a serious mental health issue, are suffering deeply, and are not experiencing those thoughts by choice. Suicidal thoughts are symptoms of a very serious mental health crisis that is related to either a mental illness or an overwhelming life situation.



What is Traumatic Loss?

While we recognize that any death that someone experiences can be considered distressing, and that studies have shown that death due to foreseen circumstances like cancer may also be experienced as traumatic because of the characteristics of the grief response (Kirstensen, et al), this section focuses on sudden unexpected deaths related to suicide, overdose, accidents, or other violent circumstances.

This type of death can include any situation where the person who died did so without warning, where the person mourning has the belief that the person suffered, the death was preventable, or another person caused the death. In addition, a traumatic loss can also include any situation where the survivor witnessed the death, experienced multiple deaths at one time, or was in a position where their life was also in danger.

These types of death experiences can cause a particularly intense acute stress response that may develop into prolonged grief, so it is important to be alert to difficulties that arise and seek additional support and/or counseling.

Grieving a Traumatic Loss

The first thing to keep in mind about experiencing grief after a traumatic loss is that the feelings that come with traumatic grief are much more intense.

You may find yourself experiencing symptoms such as nightmares or flashbacks - you may even have thoughts of suicide or “just not wanting to be here.” For some, this may come as a shock. If these types of thoughts arise, we ask that you talk to someone immediately. Although these feelings are common when we have experienced this type of loss, they are serious and professional support is an important tool to help us manage them safely.

Below is a way for you to contact someone immediately when or if these thoughts occur.

<p>National Suicide Prevention Lifeline</p> <p>Text or call 988 Lifeline www.988lifeline.org Free, confidential, and available 24/7</p>	<p>Crisis Text Line</p> <p>741741 www.crisistextline.org</p>
<p>National Domestic Violence Hotline</p> <p>1.800.799.SAFE (7233) www.thehotline.org</p>	<p>Trevor Project: Crisis and Suicide Prevention for LGBTQ Youth</p> <p>866.488.7386 Text 'START' to 678-678 www.thetrevorproject.org</p>

How will I know I need to reach out for support?

What does traumatic grief look like?

Most likely, you will experience many of the same grief reactions discussed in Part 1. In addition, however, there are some unique characteristics of traumatic grief that are important to recognize.

Rumination: For many, the questions of “why,” “what could I have done differently,” “could I have prevented this?” are all questions that you may ruminate over. Rumination is a typical grieving response when the death is traumatic. Part of our grieving is attempting to reason with the loss and identify where we were at fault, which can be difficult to manage, so please review the section on ways to cope.

World View: You may have a different outlook on the world. You may feel like the world isn't safe or that people are evil. You may begin to question your faith or higher power. There can also be an intense feeling of helplessness or vulnerability.

Preoccupation: If the person who died was involved in a violent death, you may have become preoccupied with what happened, did they know they were going to die, were they scared, were they in pain. Much like rumination, these are common thoughts that can cause intense anxiety.

Guilt and Shame: Both guilt and shame are common grief reactions. However, with traumatic loss, the feelings can be more intense. The intensity may be due to some conflict you had with the person who died or feeling that you could have prevented the death. Both feelings are important characteristics of traumatic grief that can become problematic for your mental health if not managed.

Acute Stress: Acute stress is when you may feel out of control, have sudden fear of grief, and have more physical reactions. Symptoms can come on at any moment, feel more intense within the first three months of the death, and may cause you to feel out of control or that you are going crazy. These are uncomfortable feelings that may cause you to avoid seeking help.



When should you seek help?

If you're experiencing symptoms of traumatic grief, if that grief is disrupting your life and ability to meet daily responsibilities and needs, it may be time to talk with a licensed professional who can help you process grief reactions, difficult emotions and develop coping strategies. Alexander JFS provides supportive consultation during office hours if you are unsure whether you or your loved ones can benefit from seeing a licensed professional.

We are here for you.

CONNECT THROUGH OUR WEBSITE: alexanderjfs.org/counseling



Death by Suicide



Some scholars believe that death by suicide can be one of the most complex types of loss to experience. One of the more challenging aspects of suicide is that it can be hard to talk about and experienced in isolation. Guilt, shame, anger, and blame are more intense reactions due to suicide. When the death is after a sudden interpersonal conflict, feelings of guilt can become overwhelming. Below are some grief reactions specific to suicide that may occur.

Rejection: Survivors often feel rejected or abandoned following a death by suicide. The circumstances around the suicide and evaluation of how the person felt can increase this emotional reaction. When these feelings become too intense, seeking out support or finding a suicide-specific support group is recommended.

Anger: Intense feelings of anger can often arise after death by suicide; feelings of rejection can bring on anger. You may feel angry at yourself or other people for the loss. If you are a person of faith, you may be angry at your God. You may find yourself questioning your faith. If this occurs, a trusted clergy member may be a resource. Anger is a difficult emotion to manage when we think that we must take on more responsibilities after the person's death. Many of these emotions are directly associated with feelings of victimization and rejection.

Guilt: A death by suicide is often the only option that the person sees at that moment to end the emotional or physical pain they were experiencing. For many survivors, the feelings of guilt for not preventing the death are intense. Guilt is anger turned inward. Feeling guilty about not preventing suicide is a natural response. However, it is vital to recognize your limitations to being able to stop the person from dying. Just as diseases like cancer or heart disease can be life-threatening, so too mental illness can be life-threatening. Remember, there is a big difference between guilt and responsibility: You may feel guilty about their suicide, but you are not responsible for their suicide.

Blame: Blaming yourself, your family, or your friends is a common reaction after a death by suicide. There may be feelings of blame towards the person's employer or other external systems. These feelings are natural responses to the question "why?" Seeking answers and searching for an explanation is part of our need to resolve the death and make sense of our new world without the person who died.

Fear: It is common for families who have experienced a death by suicide to have intense fear about it happening again. If the person had had a mental illness, there could be concern about other members in the family with similar issues. If you feel like you need to have a conversation with others and do not know what to say, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline listed above. Their website has a lot of helpful information on this very topic.

“The risk of love is loss, and the price of loss is grief—But the pain of grief is only a shadow when compared with the pain of never risking love.”

Hillary Stanton Zunin

Things I want to Remember:



Death by Overdose

If you have experienced a death of a loved one from an overdose or substance misuse, your grief reactions may be similar to a death by suicide. However, specific reactions like blame and guilt are slightly different. Because substance misuse may have also included high-conflict events, there may be more rumination about what could have prevented the overdose or helped the person survive.

If the person was struggling with addiction for a prolonged period, feelings of relief might even occur, and this is a common response. However, these feelings may increase guilt and shame during the grieving process.

What is important to remember is that these experiences of grief are the results of a tragic loss that may have a significant relational and family history. When seeking support, it is helpful to describe the type of loss as traumatic to connect with a professional who has the skills to treat trauma.

Things I want to remember:

“If you loved someone who loved life, live for them. Whatever you do, remember grief is strong, but life and love are stronger. Grief might have knocked at our doors, but don’t forget that we welcomed love and life with open arms long before she arrived. Please always remember, love came first.”

Rabbi Jen Kaluzny, 2025

PART 3

Parenting and Grief

Parenting a Grieving Child

One of the hardest things about being a parent is managing your emotional health while supporting and nurturing a child. When our families experience death, keeping a strong parental front requires an entirely different level of skill. Even among families, grief is unique to every person involved and has a lot to do with the family members' ages.

Children, like adults, experience grief and they may express their grief differently. Depending on the child's age, their understanding and response to grief may also change over time.

Children in preschool or younger than the age of 5 do not have an understanding of time or a general ability to think of their world outside of themselves. Depending on the person who died, their expression of grief may be sporadic. One moment, they may become sad and ask a direct question about the person who died. Within minutes, they will be right back to play. For a parent supporting a grieving child, this can be confusing. The key is to allow the child to grieve and recognize that they are responding to new and unfamiliar emotions. Be honest and age-appropriate when answering questions and comfort the child while allowing them to feel their emotions.

Once a child begins elementary school, their reactions to grief change quite a bit. They begin to recognize the finality of death and may start to ask for a lot of details about the person who died. Their questions may seem intrusive or too graphic to explain. They may begin to experience guilt or believe they had something to do with the death. This age is also when children may start acting out, losing sleep, and sometimes regressing to behaviors like bedwetting.

The best support you can give a child in this period is to follow their lead. Answer their questions using concrete terms and language they understand. When they have difficulty with "big emotions," you can provide them with an understanding that these feelings can be scary or frustrating. Allow them the opportunity to act out their emotions and help them identify the emotions with words.

Parenting a Grieving Child with Intellectual Differences

Parenting a child with intellectual differences brings unique joys—and unique challenges, especially when facing loss and grief. Children with intellectual differences may experience and express grief differently, and their understanding of death often depends on both their cognitive development and communication abilities. They may sense the emotional changes around them before fully understanding what has happened.

When supporting a grieving child with intellectual differences, the most important thing is to be honest, patient, and consistent. Use simple, concrete language to explain what happened. Avoid abstract phrases like “went to sleep” or “gone away,” which can create confusion or fear. Instead, gently say that the person “died” and that “their body stopped working.” It is okay to repeat information several times—repetition helps them process and make sense of the change.

Children with intellectual differences may show their grief through behaviors rather than words. You may notice changes in eating, sleeping, or social engagement. They may become more withdrawn, clingy, or irritable. These are natural reactions to loss. Provide reassurance and stability by keeping routines as consistent as possible, which helps them feel safe and grounded.

Encourage your child to express feelings in ways that are comfortable for them. Some may talk or ask questions repeatedly, while others may prefer drawing, listening to music, looking at photos, or spending time on familiar activities. Use these moments to gently talk about the person who died—say their name, share simple memories, and validate your child’s emotions.

Most importantly, give your child permission to grieve in their own way and at their own pace. Offer comfort and affection, and remind them that it’s okay to feel sad, angry, or confused. Continue to check in over time, especially during special dates or holidays. Grief for a child with intellectual differences, just like for any other child, may return in waves as their understanding deepens. What matters most is your ongoing presence, patience, and love as they learn to live with their loss.

Things I want to remember:



Parenting a young child who has experienced loss is a challenge. It also can be easy to put your grief aside to support your child. Prioritizing your children is a natural response and one that needs monitoring when dealing with grief.

If parents are not taking care of themselves, then the grieving child may have difficulty getting their own emotional needs met. Parents do not have to do this alone. If it gets too overwhelming, seek out a professional, join a support group, talk to a friend, and get help for you and your children.

Here are some Children’s Books about Grief that you can consider reading together with your children:

A Story for Hippo by Simon Puttock

The Invisible String by Patrice Karst

Gentle Willow by Joyce C. Mills

The Memory Box by Joanna Rowland and Thea Baker



Things I want to Remember:

PART 4

Supporting Those Grieving

How to Be Supportive

Chances are that at some point in everyone's life they will have a friend or family member that has experienced a loss. It is natural to want to take care of those we love and help them in any way possible. However, it is also possible to overdo the nurturing. In those cases, the response from those grieving can be harsh, confusing, and often uncomfortable. Rest assured, just being present for those that have experienced a death is often the most valuable response you can give.

Shortly after a death and even after the mourning process, many people need continued support. A common concern for those grieving is feeling like others have moved on when the grief is still very present in their personal life.

As mentioned earlier, grief never ends, it just becomes more manageable. So, too, is the support of a friend or family member. The role of supporting can be challenging when faced with the harsh reality of our own mortality. Bearing witness to those grieving can cause us discomfort, and often we are at a loss for words or are unsure of what to say.

Steps to Being a Supporter

Step 1: *Listen and be present.* It can be difficult to know just what to say, and it is completely natural to be afraid of saying the wrong thing. But being a supportive listener is what people appreciate the most when grieving. And, for those times you don't know what to say, let the other person know. Sometimes, the best medicine is to just sit with the other person and be in their presence of grieving.

Step 2: *Show up.* Birthdays, anniversaries, the anniversary of the person's death, and holidays are often the hardest days for a grieving person. Showing up during important dates can be a source of strength for your friend and helps them know they are not alone in their grief. Send a card or give them a call. Be open and honest about why you are thinking of them on these dates. And then, just sit and listen.

Step 3: *Avoid giving advice.* Even in the best of times, advice is annoying. Being supportive means not passing judgment and not attempting to expedite a person’s grief. Statements like “Soon you will feel better” or “You just need to cry it out” are far from helpful and even hurtful.

Step 4: *Use the name of the person who died.* Grieving is not a process of removing the memory of someone. The person who died is important to your friend. Use their name and talk about them. Tell your friend how much you miss them, too. If your friend gets sad and you’re not sure what to do, see Step 1.

Step 5: *You’re friends, so be friends.* We can’t forget having a friend is a positive experience. We like to do things together, watch movies and share meals. So, offer up the opportunity to be a friend. Their world has changed a lot, and your friendship shouldn’t. Ask them what they need and be prepared for them to reject the idea. If they can’t tell you, use Step 1.

Supporting a friend who is grieving is never easy. We don’t look forward to this role, but it is a crucial role to take. Knowing the basics of supporting someone grieving is an act of love we all will need at some point in our lives.

Steps to Supporting Adults with Intellectual Differences Through Grief

Within the population of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), responses to death can be highly individualized and may differ significantly from typical grief reactions. Some individuals may understand death in a concrete manner and perceive it as a natural part of life, exhibiting minimal emotional distress or requiring little formal grief support. Others may experience profound confusion, anxiety, or behavioral changes, reflecting the diverse ways in which grief can manifest within this population. Recognizing and responding to these varied expressions is essential in providing compassionate and effective support. Here are some steps to consider:

Step 1: *Listen with patience and understanding.* Grief can be confusing and hard to express for someone with an intellectual difference. Give them time to share what they feel in their own way—through words, gestures, stories, or even silence. Avoid rushing the conversation or trying to make sense of everything they say. What matters most is that they feel heard and accepted.

Step 2: Use clear and simple language. Use concrete, direct words such as “died” or “their body stopped working.” Be honest and gentle, and check if they understand what you said. Repetition may help them process the reality of the loss.

Step 3: Offer consistency and reassurance. Grief can bring changes that feel overwhelming. Keeping routines stable helps provide a sense of safety. Reassure them that they are cared for, that their feelings are okay, and that people will continue to support them. Predictability can bring comfort when things feel uncertain.

Step 4: Help them remember. Encourage sharing memories about the person who died—looking at photos, lighting a candle, drawing, or visiting a meaningful place. Using the person’s name helps make it real and honors their connection. Grieving is not forgetting; it’s remembering with care.

Step 5: Support emotional expression in different ways. Not everyone shows sadness by crying or talking. Some may express it through changes in behavior, routines, or mood. Support healthy outlets—art, music, movement, or simply being together quietly. Let them know that whatever they feel is okay.

Step 6: Stay connected over time. Grief doesn’t end quickly. Continue to check in on anniversaries, holidays, or days that may trigger memories. Being there consistently helps remind them they’re not alone. Sometimes, a simple “I’m thinking of you today” can mean a lot.

The 11 Tenets of Companionship

Dr. Alan Wolfelt, a leading educator in grief counseling, refers to the role of support as “companionship” and incorporated 11 tenets for being a supportive companion to those grieving. The 11 tenets are simple and a good starting point for anyone who wants to be supportive.

1. Companionship is about **being present** to another person's pain; it is not about taking away the pain.
2. Companionship is about **going to the wilderness of the soul** with another human being; it is not about thinking you are responsible for finding the way out.
3. Companionship is about **honoring the spirit**; it is not about focusing on the intellect.

4. Companionship is about *listening with the heart*; it is not about analyzing with the head.
5. Companionship is about *bearing witness to the struggles of others*; it is not about judging or directing these struggles.
6. Companionship is about *walking alongside*; it is not about leading or being led.
7. Companionship means *discovering the gifts of sacred silence*; it does not mean filling up every moment with words.
8. Companionship the bereaved is about *being still*; it is not about frantic movement forward.
9. Companionship is about *respecting disorder and confusion*; it is not about imposing order and logic.
10. Companionship is about *learning from others*; it is not about teaching them.
11. Companionship is about *curiosity*; it is not about expertise.

Things I can do:



Using Resources to Support Individuals with IDD in Grief

- 1. Access the Website:** Go to <https://www.autismandgrief.org/resources/social-stories/>.
- 2. Explore Available Social Stories:** Browse the social stories available for different situations related to grief, loss, and bereavement. Each story is designed to be accessible and concrete, helping individuals with IDD understand and process their experiences.
- 3. Select Age- and Ability-Appropriate Stories:** Consider the developmental level and communication style of the child or adult you are supporting. Choose stories that are most relevant to their understanding and emotional needs.
- 4. Review the Story Before Sharing:** Read through the story in advance to ensure it aligns with the individual's current situation and emotional state. Adapt wording or illustrations as needed to make it more personalized.
- 5. Use Stories as Discussion Tools:** Share the story with the individual in a calm, supportive setting. Use it to initiate conversations about feelings, loss, and coping strategies.
- 6. Incorporate Visual Supports and Repetition:** Encourage understanding by pairing the story with visual cues, gestures, or repeated readings. Consistent reinforcement can help the individual process and retain information.
- 7. Monitor Emotional Responses:** Observe how the individual reacts during and after reading the story. Offer reassurance, validation, and additional support as needed.
- 8. Combine with Broader Support:** Use the social stories as part of a broader grief support approach, including individualized counseling, social skills support, or behavioral interventions, depending on the individual's needs.

Other potential resources:

PART 5

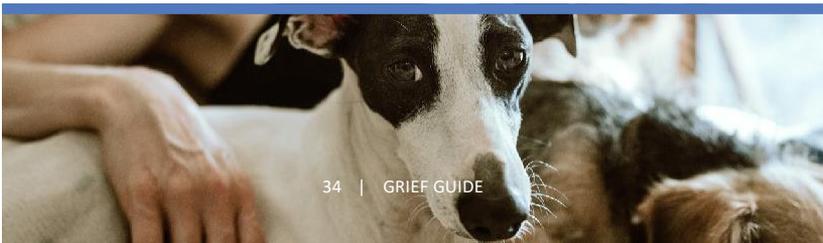
Other Types of Grief

Loss of a Pet

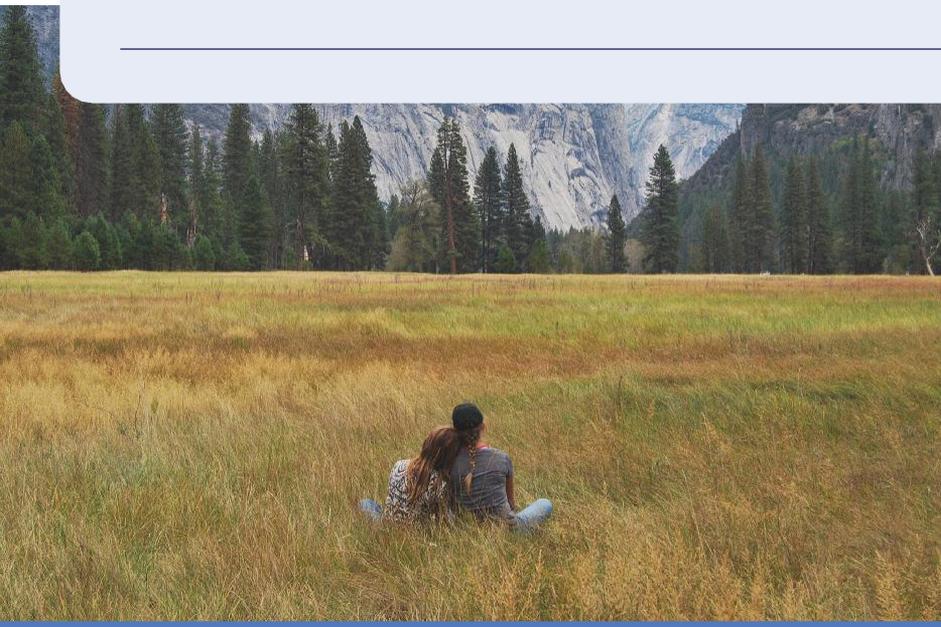
Losing a pet is painful to experience and does not need to be treated differently from any other type of grief. Pets are an important part of the family, and it is healthy to grieve the loss. Your grief is a unique experience that equates to the love you have for your pet. Below are some considerations when you find yourself grieving the loss of your loving animal.

Points to consider when you have lost a pet.

1. Coming to terms with your pet's death is difficult. Their absence will be felt emotionally and physically. Try to be gentle with yourself while acknowledging the loss. It may take some time to adjust to life without your pet.
2. Take time to recognize the significance of your pet's role as a family member. We create a unique attachment to our pets, and they love us no matter our faults. Give yourself time and space to grieve.
3. Feeling guilty is natural but can keep us stuck in how our pets died rather than the life they lived. Celebrate your pet's life when you find yourself ruminating on their death. Challenge your guilt with reality and acknowledge that being the perfect pet owner is unrealistic.
4. Continue your relationship with your pet through memories. Create a memory book, write a tribute, or donate to your favorite pet organization in their name.
5. Not everyone is going to understand your grief. Your loss is significant to you, and no other person can change that. When you are grieving the loss of a pet, seek out your pet-loving support network. Let those that are close know you are in pain.



Things I want to remember about my pet:



“If you loved someone who loved life, live for them. Whatever you do, remember grief is strong, but life and love are stronger. Grief might have knocked at our doors, but don’t forget that we welcomed love and life with open arms long before she arrived. Please always remember, love came first.”

Rabbi Jen Kaluzny, 2025

References

Archer, J. (1999). *The nature of grief: The evolution and psychology of reactions to loss*. Taylor & Francis/Routledge.

Kristensen, T., Elklit, A., & Karstoft, K. (2012). Posttraumatic Stress Disorder After Bereavement: Early Psychological Sequelae of Losing a Close Relative Due to Terminal Cancer. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 17(6), 508–521.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2012.665304>

Linde, K., Tremblay, J., Steinig, J., Nagl, M., Kersting, A., & Virgili, G. (2017). Grief interventions for people bereaved by suicide: A systematic review. *PLoS ONE*, 12(6), e0179496. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0179496>

Mayo Clinic. (2018, November 17). Grief: Coping with reminders after a loss. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/end-of-life/in-depth/grief/20045340>

Mughal S, Azhar Y, Siddiqui WJ. Grief Reaction. [Updated 2020 Jul 2]. In: StatPearls [Internet]. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing; 2020 Jan-. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK507832/>

Rynearson, E., Schut, H., & Stroebe, M. (2013). *Complicated grief after violent death: identification and intervention*.

Worden, J. (n.d.). *Grief counseling and grief therapy: a handbook for the mental health practitioner* (Third edition.). Springer Pub.

Credited photos in this guide were taken by artists from Joan and Stanford Alexander **Celebration Company**, an Alexander JFS social entrepreneurial program for adults with disabilities.

Glossary of Terms Used in This Guide

Bereavement is a period of grief and mourning after a loss.

Companionship is being present to another person's pain and helping to create a safe place for them to embrace and experience their feelings of loss.

Grief is a person's emotional response to loss.

Mourning is an outward expression of that grief, including cultural and religious customs surrounding the death. It is also the process of adapting to life after loss.

Rumination involves repetitive thinking or dwelling on negative feelings and distress and their causes and consequences.

Traumatic Loss is the loss of loved ones in the context of potentially traumatizing circumstances. Examples are losses due to homicide, suicide, accidents, and natural disasters, and losses resulting from war and terror.

Notes to remember:

<p>National Suicide Prevention Lifeline</p> <p>Text or call 988 Lifeline www.988lifeline.org</p> <p>Free, confidential, and available 24/7</p>	<p>Crisis Text Line</p> <p>741741 www.crisistextline.org</p>
<p>National Domestic Violence Hotline</p> <p>1.800.799.SAFE (7233) www.thehotline.org</p>	<p>Trevor Project: Crisis and Suicide Prevention for LGBTQ Youth</p> <p>866.488.7386</p> <p>Text 'START' to 678-678 www.thetrevorproject.org</p>

You Are Not Alone

Alexander Jewish Family Service is here to help.
 To schedule a consultation with our mental health professionals, please reach out to us:

CONNECT THROUGH OUR WEBSITE: alexanderjfs.org/counseling
 EMAIL: adulthoodcounseling@alexanderjfs.org
 CALL: (713) 986-7825

If you live outside of Texas and would like professional help, we are happy to connect you with mental health professionals in your area.





This guide was informed not only by professionals but also by the voices of many survivors who have navigated this painful journey toward healing.

We offer these words to meet the expressed needs of those in our community who seek guidance in their grieving.

Edited by Alexander Jewish Family Service
Behavioral and Mental Health Services Team

Revised in February 2026

GRIEF GUIDE

To help you cope with your loss

Joan and Stanford Alexander Jewish Family Service
alexanderjfs.org