



The Grief Roller Coaster

Understanding the changing emotions of loss - and finding steadier moments along the way

Grief rarely travels in a straight line. It can feel more like a ride with sudden drops, slow climbs, sharp turns and unexpected pauses. One morning you may feel able to manage; later, a memory or anniversary can bring an intense wave. This movement does not mean you are failing or returning to the beginning.

The roller-coaster image is only a metaphor. You do not have to enjoy the ride, surrender control or arrive at a neat final destination. The important truth is that grief changes, and you deserve support while it does.

Why grief feels unpredictable

Loss changes more than our emotions. It can affect sleep, appetite, energy, sensory tolerance, memory, identity, relationships and our sense of safety. The nervous system may move between alarm, collapse, restlessness and numbness. Neurodivergent people may experience especially intense sensory or routine disruption, delayed emotional processing, or difficulty naming what is happening inside.

Grief can also be layered. A present loss may awaken earlier bereavements, trauma, family experiences or losses that were never recognised. Rather than judging the size or timing of a reaction, it can help to ask: "What is this moment touching in me?"

The different turns grief may take



These feelings may overlap, repeat or not appear at all. They are possibilities, not stages or instructions.

Confusion

The world may feel unfamiliar. Concentration, memory and decision-making can become harder while your mind tries to understand what has changed.

Longing

You may ache for the person, relationship, place, ability or future that has been lost. Longing can arrive suddenly through music, smells or ordinary moments.

Anger

Anger may be directed at circumstances, professionals, family, the person who died, yourself or life itself. It often sits beside hurt, helplessness or injustice.

Anxiety

Loss can shake our sense of safety. You may worry about further loss, health, finances, being alone or whether you can cope with what comes next.

Numbness

Feeling very little can be the nervous system protecting you from too much, too quickly. Numbness is a grief response, not evidence that you did not care.

Guilt and “if only” thoughts

The mind may replay decisions and imagine different outcomes. Hindsight can feel convincing, but it does not mean you had the knowledge or control you wish you had.

Relief

Relief can follow a long illness, uncertainty, conflict or caring responsibility. It can exist alongside love and sadness without making either less genuine.

Moments of peace

Calm, laughter and connection may appear between painful waves. These moments are not betrayal. They can be part of the body finding room to breathe.



Finding something steady during the ride

Coping does not mean controlling every feeling. It means creating small points of steadiness so you are not carrying everything alone.

1. Name the moment. Try “A wave of grief is here” rather than “I am back at the beginning.” Naming creates a little space around the feeling.
2. Reduce the next step. Choose one action: drink, sit down, open a window, message someone or complete only the most necessary task.
3. Use the senses. A familiar blanket, gentle pressure, quiet music, a comforting scent or less light may help the nervous system settle.
4. Allow oscillation. It is healthy to move between engaging with grief and taking a break through work, routine, creativity, rest or company.
5. Plan for difficult dates. Decide in advance what you want, what you do not want and who could be available.

When supporting someone else

Do not rush them towards acceptance or a “better place”. Ask what helps today. Offer specific practical support, remember meaningful dates and be willing to hear the same story more than once. If they want to speak about the person or loss, use the name and listen. If they need quiet or distraction, respect that too.

A gentle reflection

Where do you feel you are today - climbing, falling, turning, paused, or simply holding on? What emotion is taking up the most space? What is one steadying support you can reach for? Your answer can change from hour to hour.

When extra support matters

Speak with a GP, counsellor or bereavement service if grief feels unbearable, remains intensely disabling, or you are struggling to care for yourself. Seek urgent help if you feel at risk of harming yourself or cannot stay safe. Asking for support does not place a timetable on grief; it gives you company and care while you move through it.

This resource provides general emotional wellbeing information and is not a diagnosis or replacement for personalised medical or therapeutic care.