

Learning to Live Alongside Grief

Carrying loss while slowly making room for life again

Grief does not have to disappear for life to begin growing around it. Living alongside grief is not about leaving somebody behind. It is about finding a way to carry love, memory and loss while gradually reconnecting with the life that is still here.

When grief becomes part of your life

A significant loss can change far more than mood. It can change the shape of the day, the way home feels, the people you automatically reach for, your confidence, appetite, sleep, concentration, relationships and sense of who you are. NHS guidance recognises that grief can include shock, numbness, overwhelming sadness, exhaustion, anger and guilt, and that powerful feelings can appear unexpectedly. Loss can also follow relationship breakdown, loss of work or home, or serious illness - not only bereavement.

In the early days, grief can feel as though it occupies every available space. You may wake into the loss before you have even fully opened your eyes. Simple decisions can feel exhausting. You may forget why you entered a room, reread the same sentence repeatedly or find conversation difficult. These experiences can be frightening, particularly if you expect yourself to function as you did before.

There is no correct sequence

People often hear about 'stages' of grief, but real grief rarely behaves like a checklist. Feelings may overlap, repeat, disappear and return. You may experience disbelief after a period of acceptance, anger months after feeling calm, or a surprisingly peaceful day followed by a painful one. Cruse emphasises that there is no right way to grieve and no set timeline. Your relationship, the circumstances of the loss, your previous experiences and the support around you all influence how grief feels.

The idea of growing around grief

One helpful way of understanding adaptation is the 'growing around grief' model. Instead of expecting grief itself to shrink neatly, the idea is that life gradually develops around it. New routines, relationships, experiences, confidence and meaning can begin to occupy space alongside the loss. At times the grief may still feel as intense as it did at the beginning, but it is no longer the only thing in your life.

You are not failing when grief returns. A wave of grief after a calmer period does not put you back at the beginning. It means something has touched the relationship, memory or future you lost.

The Many Ways Grief Can Show Up

Grief is emotional, physical, social and practical. Understanding this can help you respond to yourself with more patience.

Emotionally

Sadness may be obvious, but grief can also look like irritability, anger, anxiety, relief, jealousy, guilt, numbness, fear or feeling strangely detached. Relief can be especially confusing after a long illness or difficult relationship; it does not cancel love.

Physically

Tiredness, poor sleep, changes in appetite, headaches, muscle tension, restlessness, a heavy feeling in the chest or stomach and reduced energy can accompany periods of intense grief. New or concerning physical symptoms should still be discussed with an appropriate healthcare professional.

Cognitively

Concentration, memory and decision-making can temporarily become harder. Grieving people often describe 'brain fog'. Keeping lists, simplifying choices and reducing unnecessary demands can help.

Socially

You may want company one day and privacy the next. Some friendships become stronger while others feel disappointing. People sometimes avoid grief because they do not know what to say; that can still feel deeply lonely.

Practically

Loss can bring paperwork, financial changes, childcare, caring responsibilities, moving home, sorting belongings or changes to work. Practical stress can intensify emotional grief.

Spiritually or existentially

Loss can change beliefs about fairness, faith, meaning, mortality and the future. You may question things you previously felt certain about.

Triggers and reminders

Triggers are not always dramatic. A supermarket aisle, weather, a particular mug, somebody wearing the same perfume, a television programme or reaching for your phone can suddenly make the absence vivid. Anniversaries and birthdays are obvious triggers, but ordinary moments can be just as powerful because they belonged to everyday life together.

Try this: if a predictable date is approaching, make a gentle plan. Decide who you want around you, what you want to avoid, whether you would like to remember the person in a particular way, and what you will do if the day becomes harder than expected.

Learning to Carry the Loss

Adaptation does not require you to stop loving, remembering or talking about the person who died. Many people maintain a continuing bond - an ongoing inner relationship expressed through memories, values, stories, traditions or private conversations.

Keeping connection

You might keep photographs visible, visit a meaningful place, cook their favourite food, wear something connected to them, continue a tradition, write to them, speak their name or tell younger family members stories. There is no prescribed ritual.

Sorting belongings

There is no deadline for clothes, possessions or photographs. Some people need to clear things quickly; others need years. Practical circumstances sometimes force decisions earlier than you would choose. Try to distinguish what must happen now from what can wait.

Making new memories

The first holiday, celebration, friendship or relationship after a loss can bring guilt. New memories do not erase old ones. Life expanding is not evidence that the person mattered less.

Identity after loss

If you were a spouse, child, sibling, friend or carer, the relationship formed part of your identity. You may need time to discover what your role means now. This is especially true when caring had structured much of everyday life.

Finding meaning without forcing meaning

Some people eventually create meaning through charity, family, creativity, work, advocacy or simply living according to values learned from the person. Others do not want to find a 'reason' for what happened. Both positions are valid.

Guilt and the 'if only' thoughts

Grief often produces counterfactual thinking: *if only I had called, noticed, stayed, insisted, said something different*. Sometimes there are genuine regrets that need tenderness and perhaps repair where possible. At other times the mind is trying to create control over something that was never fully controllable. Ask yourself: *Am I judging the person I was then using information I only have now?*

A gentler question: If somebody I loved told me this exact story, would I speak to them as harshly as I am speaking to myself?

Getting Through the Harder Days

Some days are about growth; some are simply about getting through. A difficult day does not need an impressive coping plan.

- **Make the day smaller.** Think about the next hour rather than the next year. Choose one manageable thing: shower, breakfast, medication, fresh air or replying to one message.
- **Keep food and fluids simple.** Grief can suppress appetite and motivation. Easy, familiar food is better than expecting yourself to prepare perfect meals.
- **Create anchors.** A regular morning drink, short walk, evening programme or phone call can give shape to a day that feels empty.
- **Rest without judging yourself.** Emotional processing is tiring. Needing more rest does not mean you are lazy or 'giving in'.
- **Use movement gently.** Walking, stretching or being outdoors may reduce some physical tension and can support sleep and mood.
- **Let somebody help.** Accepting a meal, lift, dog walk or company can preserve energy for the things only you can do.
- **Write things down.** Lists, reminders and calendars compensate for concentration difficulties and reduce the pressure to hold everything in your head.
- **Limit numbing strategies.** Alcohol, gambling, drugs or other compulsive behaviours can temporarily blunt grief but may create additional problems.
- **Have a difficult-day contact.** Choose somebody you can message without needing to explain the whole story each time.
- **Give grief a container.** Journalling, a memory box, music, photographs or a particular place can create intentional time for grief rather than feeling it must be suppressed all day.

Sleep and nights

Night can amplify grief because distractions stop. Keep expectations realistic. A calm wind-down routine, low lighting, familiar audio and avoiding difficult administrative tasks immediately before bed may help. If sleep problems persist or significantly affect functioning, speak with your GP.

Returning to work and responsibilities

Returning to work can provide structure but can also be exhausting. Concentration may be reduced and social questions can feel intrusive. Where possible, consider a phased return, reduced demands, planned breaks or a trusted colleague who knows what has happened. You do not have to tell everybody the details.

Relationships, Loneliness & Different Ways of Grieving

Two people can love the same person and grieve completely differently. One may want to talk constantly while another becomes quiet. One may return to routine quickly while another struggles to function. Difference does not necessarily mean lack of love.

Family grief can also reactivate old patterns. Siblings may disagree about belongings, funerals, care decisions or what the person would have wanted. Partners may become frustrated when their grieving styles do not match. Children may move in and out of grief through play, questions or behaviour.

When people stop asking

Support is often strongest immediately after a death and then reduces while the grieving person is only beginning to understand the long-term reality. It can hurt when other people appear to move on. Consider telling trusted people specifically what remains helpful: saying the person's name, remembering important dates, inviting you even if you sometimes decline, or simply checking in without expecting you to be cheerful.

Loneliness can exist in company

You can be surrounded by people and still feel profoundly alone because the particular person you want is missing. Peer bereavement groups can be helpful precisely because less explanation is required. Cruse offers helpline, local, one-to-one and group support in many areas of the UK.

When life begins to feel enjoyable again

Pleasure after bereavement can bring unexpected guilt. You may catch yourself laughing and then feel disloyal. Try to remember that grief and enjoyment are not opposites. The ability to experience warmth, humour, interest or hope does not rewrite the past. It shows that your emotional world is beginning to hold more than one thing again.

Permission: You are allowed to have a good day. You are allowed to book something for the future. You are allowed to love the person who died and still be interested in the life ahead of you.

Therapy, Bereavement Support & When to Reach Out

Not everyone needs formal therapy after bereavement. Many people are supported through family, friends, community, faith, peer support and time. But there is no virtue in struggling alone when additional support would help.

Person-centred counselling

A confidential, non-judgemental relationship where you can speak freely without being hurried through a model or told what you should feel.

Bereavement support

Focused space to understand the death, the relationship, your emotional responses and the practical changes that have followed.

Trauma-informed therapy

May be appropriate when the death was sudden, violent, medically traumatic or accompanied by intrusive images, avoidance, nightmares or a persistent sense of threat.

Couples or family work

Can help when grief has created distance, conflict or misunderstandings between people who are coping in different ways.

Peer support

Groups can reduce isolation and allow people to hear from others who recognise experiences that friends may not fully understand.

When grief remains intensely disruptive

For most people, grief gradually changes in intensity. NHS guidance notes that some people experience prolonged grief disorder, where grief after a death remains severely disruptive for many months or years. Signs can include persistent painful emotions, spending a great deal of time preoccupied with the person who died, difficulty accepting the death, inability to return to everyday activities and suicidal thoughts. If this sounds familiar, speak with your GP or a qualified mental-health professional.

Seek support sooner if you need it

You do not need to wait for grief to become a crisis. Speak with your GP or another professional if low mood or anxiety is worsening, you are unable to manage essential daily needs, you are using substances or other behaviours to cope, trauma symptoms are overwhelming, or you simply feel you need somewhere safe to talk.

If you are in immediate danger or cannot keep yourself safe: seek urgent help through emergency or crisis services. Samaritans can be contacted free on **116 123** at any time for emotional support.

A Message From Me

I do not think learning to live alongside grief means learning to leave somebody behind. I think sometimes it means slowly learning how to carry them differently.

There may be days when you feel as though you are doing okay, and then something tiny catches you - a smell, a song, an empty chair, a phrase they used, something you would normally have told them - and suddenly the grief feels as close as it did at the beginning.

Please do not see those moments as going backwards. Love leaves traces everywhere. Of course there will be reminders.

You are allowed to miss somebody and still have a life. You are allowed to laugh without feeling guilty. You are allowed to make new memories without replacing old ones. You are allowed to have days when you want to talk about them constantly and other days when you simply cannot.

There is no prize for grieving quietly, neatly or quickly. You do not need to demonstrate that you are coping for the comfort of everybody around you.

If today is difficult, make today smaller. Eat something simple. Have a drink. Open the window. Sit with somebody safe. Put off what can genuinely wait. Tell yourself that you do not need to work out the rest of your life tonight.

And when a little bit of life begins to return - perhaps you notice the sunshine, enjoy a conversation, book something for the future or laugh properly for the first time - please do not feel that you are betraying the person you lost.

Living is not forgetting.

The relationship may have changed, but the love, the influence, the memories and the parts of them that became part of you can continue. You can carry grief in one hand and life in the other. Some days one will feel much heavier than the other, but both are allowed to be there.

Be gentle with the version of you that is learning how to live in a world that changed. You do not have to be who you were before. You are allowed to become somebody who carries this loss and still finds moments of safety, connection, purpose and eventually joy.

With warmth,

Maggie

Space to Breathe Therapy

Books & Places for Support

Grief Works - *Julia Samuel*

A compassionate exploration of bereavement, relationships and the ways people adapt to loss.

The Plain Guide to Grief - *John Wilson*

Accessible guidance that avoids treating grief as a rigid sequence of stages.

It's OK That You're Not OK - *Megan Devine*

Challenges the pressure to fix grief and validates the reality of living with profound loss.

A Grief Observed - *C. S. Lewis*

A brief, candid account of bereavement, longing, anger and questions of meaning.

The Wild Edge of Sorrow - *Francis Weller*

Reflects on grief, community, ritual and the importance of allowing sorrow a place.

The Grieving Brain - *Mary-Frances O'Connor*

Explores what neuroscience can tell us about attachment, absence and the brain's process of adapting.

Support

Cruse Bereavement Support: free UK helpline **0808 808 1677**, plus bereavement information, local services, one-to-one and group support. www.cruse.org.uk

NHS: grief and bereavement information, guidance on when to contact your GP, and access routes to mental-health support. www.nhs.uk

Samaritans: free emotional support at any time on **116 123**. www.samaritans.org

The Good Grief Trust: bereavement information and signposting to support. www.thegoodgrieftrust.org

Sue Ryder: online bereavement support and community resources. www.sueryder.org

Space to Breathe Therapy - Support Hub: further grief, emotional wellbeing and self-support resources. www.spacetobreathetherapy.co.uk

Keep this guide and return to it. You do not need to absorb everything at once. Grief can make concentration difficult; use the page that helps you today and leave the rest for another time.

This resource is educational and supportive and does not replace individual medical or mental-health assessment, diagnosis or treatment.