

Finding Your Way Forward

Grief does not end. But it changes. And so will you.

EVIDENCE-BASED

When Joy Feels Like Betrayal

One of the most common — and most painful — experiences in grief is the guilt that comes with moments of happiness. You laugh at something, and then immediately feel ashamed. You enjoy a meal, and then feel guilty for being alive to taste it.

This is not betrayal. It is healing. Joy and grief are not opposites — they coexist. The person you lost would not want their absence to extinguish your ability to feel joy. Allowing yourself moments of happiness is not moving on — it is carrying them with you in a new way.

Grief Anniversaries and Trigger Dates

Certain dates carry weight — the anniversary of the death, their birthday, the holidays you used to spend together. These “grief surges” can feel as raw as the early days.

How to prepare:

- Plan ahead — decide how you want to spend the day before it arrives
- Create a ritual: light a candle, visit a meaningful place, share a memory
- Give yourself permission to feel whatever comes up
- Let others know what you need — some want company, others want solitude
- The anticipation is often harder than the day itself

Returning to Work and Daily Life

Going back to work after a loss can feel surreal. Research on widows returning to the workforce shows that grief is not a finite experience — it influences workplace performance, self-perception, and relationships with colleagues. Many bereaved individuals describe being in “survival mode” for months.

- Communicate with your manager about what you need (flexibility, lighter workload, time off)
- Set small goals each day rather than trying to return to full capacity immediately
- Give yourself grace for the cognitive fog (it is real and temporary)
- Consider whether a gradual return is possible

Source: LSU — Narratives of Widowhood (Hager, 2025), https://repository.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/6911/

Creating New Rituals and Meaning

Many bereaved individuals find comfort in creating new rituals that honor the person they lost:

- A yearly donation or volunteer day in their name
- Cooking their favorite meal on their birthday
- Writing them a letter on the anniversary of the death
- Planting a garden, lighting a candle, or visiting a meaningful place
- Sharing stories with family so their memory lives in others

What “Moving Forward” Really Means

There is a concept in grief theory often called “growing around grief.” The grief itself does not shrink — but your life grows larger around it. New experiences, new relationships, and new meaning slowly expand the container that holds your loss.

Moving forward means:

- Carrying the love you shared into new chapters
- Letting the person you lost shape who you become — not just who you were
- Finding meaning in the pain, not despite it
- Accepting that grief may always be part of your story — and that this is not a failure

You are not the same person you were before this loss. You will never be. But you can become someone who carries both the sorrow and the love, and finds a way to live with both.

If you need someone to talk to right now:

NHPCO Grief Support: 1-800-658-8898 | 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Call or text 988