

Understanding Grief

What grief is, what it is not, and why there is no right way to do it.

EVIDENCE-BASED

Grief Is Not Linear

The popular “5 stages of grief” model (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) was originally developed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross based on interviews with dying patients — not bereaved families. Decades of research have shown that grief does not follow a predictable sequence. It is nonlinear, messy, and deeply personal.

When grief does not conform to stages, people worry they are “doing it wrong.” You are not. There is no wrong way to grieve.

Source: Psychology Today, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/laugh-cry-live/202303/stages-of-grief-the-harmful-myth-that-refuses-to-die>

Common Grief Myths

Myth: “Grief follows 5 stages in order.”

Truth: Research shows grief is nonlinear. The stage model was for dying patients, not bereaved families.

Myth: “You should be over it by now.”

Truth: Grief has no expiration date. Healing means learning to carry love forward in a new way.

Myth: “Crying means you are weak.”

Truth: Crying is a physiological stress-release response — not weakness.

Myth: “Talking about them makes it worse.”

Truth: Research shows sharing stories about the deceased is therapeutic. Silence deepens pain.

Sources: PMC (2021), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9637829/>; Tillery Compassionate Care, <https://tillerycompassionatecare.org/news/10-common-grief-myths/>

Anticipatory Grief

Anticipatory grief is the mourning that begins before a death occurs — often when a loved one has a terminal illness. You may grieve the future you imagined, the roles that are changing, and the slow loss of the person you knew. It can include sadness, anxiety, guilt, and even relief — and feeling all of these at once does not make you a bad person.

Source: PMC (2021), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9637829/>; Distress Centre Calgary, <https://distresscentre.com/2024/02/28/10-types-of-grief-explained/>

Complicated Grief (Prolonged Grief Disorder)

Complicated grief — now recognized in the DSM-5 as Prolonged Grief Disorder — occurs when intense grief persists beyond 12 months and significantly impairs daily functioning. It affects an estimated 7-10% of bereaved individuals. Signs include:

- Intense longing that does not lessen over time
- Difficulty accepting the reality of the death
- Feeling that life has no meaning or purpose
- Emotional numbness or detachment from others

Prolonged Grief Disorder is not weakness — it is a clinical condition that responds well to specialized grief therapy. If this sounds like you, please talk to a healthcare provider.

Source: PMC (2020), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7370894/>

Disenfranchised Grief

Disenfranchised grief occurs when a loss is not openly acknowledged or socially validated. This includes grief for ex-spouses, estranged family members, non-traditional relationships, miscarriage, or the death of a patient (for healthcare workers). Just because others do not recognize your loss does not mean your grief is any less real.

Source: Distress Centre Calgary, <https://distresscentre.com/2024/02/28/10-types-of-grief-explained/>

If you need someone to talk to right now:

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