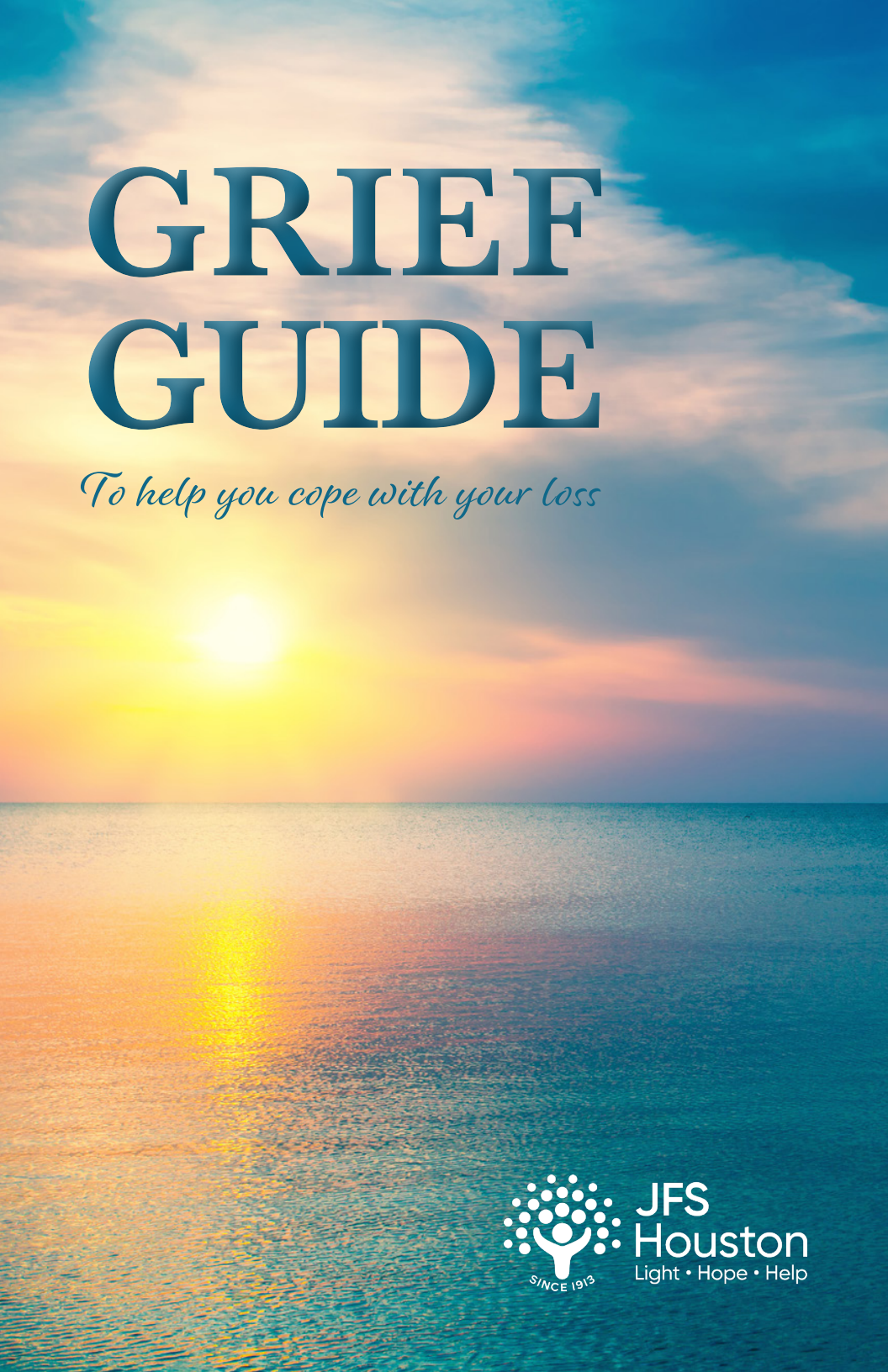
GRIEF
GUIDE
To help you cope with your loss
SINCE 1913
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Welcome.

Before reading this guide, we would like to acknowledge your willingness to learn more about grief. Grief is a labyrinth of physical and emotional reminders of loss. There are good days and bad days, and everyone's grief is as unique as the person that died and the person remembering them. We hope this guide is helpful in your journey. Take what you need and leave the rest behind.

-JFS Houston Behavioral and Mental Health Services Team

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 a family member 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. Below is an overview of what you will find.

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.

Part 2—Traumatic loss. Death by suicide, overdose, murder, or an accident leaves the survivor with many unanswered questions. In addition, there are 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.

Part 3—Parenting and grief. This section focuses on the child's unique ways children grieve at various ages and what parents can do to support the entire family.

Part 4—Supporting someone grieving. This section covers tips on supporting and acknowledging the uncomfortable feelings that come with bearing witness to grief.

PART 1—Where to Start

Grief has no timeline, and the theories around stages, phases, or processes of grief may not apply to you. This guide will help inform what to expect when you are grieving. It is important to note, your grief is unique, and what you experience is also unique to you. The type of 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. Customs and rituals related to mourning vary greatly by religion and culture. Throughout this guide, we are addressing 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 occur on holidays, birthdays 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.

Common Grief Reactions

Physical 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 difficulty

Mental/Cognitive Reactions

- Confusion
- Forgetfulness
- Lack of motivation
- Distractibility
- Rumination of the loss
- Nightmares

Emotional and Behavioral Reactions

- Sadness
- Anger
- Guilt
- Self-blame
- Numbness
- Depression
- Helplessness
- Aggression
- Anxious
- Frustration
- Irritability
- Fear
- Longing for the loved one
- Distress
- Hopelessness
- Shock

Other Reactions

- Suicidal thoughts
- Intolerance
- Denial
- Avoidance
- Difficulty with relationships
- Neglecting hygiene/self-care
- Difficulty with faith
- Preoccupied with "why"
- Loneliness

(Source—Archer, Wordon, Mughal)

These are just a few of the different ways that you might experience a grief reaction. Grief is a natural experience in life. However, 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 to grieve. If your physical symptoms give you concern, speak to your physician.

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 that are supportive is helpful during any period of grieving. During the early stages of mourning, relying on others may feel burdensome but provides much-needed space to grieve. Close family, friends, clergy, 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 reflecting that back to those that 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 taking it when you are ready. And if you have a friend who may need some education on supporting someone 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 that can be empathetic.

Find a Support Group

During the initial days of mourning, support can be most helpful coming from your closest relationships. Friends, family, coworkers, 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 that 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. How to get started with a support group is as easy as going online. There are online 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 will be confidential and recognize that everyone grieves differently
- Groups provide space for everyone involved. Equal time is allowed for those that 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 about grief and provide a safe place for all to share.

Take Care of Yourself

The term "self-care" is used in a lot of materials related to grief or any situation that may elevate emotions. While self-care is an important part of your life, taking care of yourself can be slightly different. First, give yourself space to tend to your family's

needs, such as doctor appointments, 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, every significant date can come with a new round of grief reactions. And unfortunately, each year after can have a dose of grief. This is sometimes referred to as an anniversary reaction (Mayo Clinic). Keeping these dates in mind and preparing yourself will help you cope with these grief reminders. Here are some tips to prepare for these days.

- **Prepare:** Making a plan for the day can ensure that you are taking care of yourself. Let your support network know the day will be difficult. Reach out to those that 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 watch their favorite movie or bake 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. And 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 that 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 it through the day.

A special note about grief reminders: reminders of the person that died will happen often and can happen at unexpected times. 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.

0 to 60 days—rely on your support network.

60 days plus—consider seeing a therapist if grief is not subsiding

Ninety days—seek out continued support for the next 12 months

Things I want to remember...

PART 2—Traumatic Loss

What is Traumatic Loss?

Any death that someone experiences can be considered distressing. Studies have shown that death due to foreseen circumstances like cancer are also regarded as traumatic because of the characteristics of the grief response (Kirstensen et al.). However, this section focuses on sudden unexpected deaths related to suicide, overdose, accident,s or other violent circumstances. This type of death can include any situation where the person that died did so without warning, belief that the person suffered, was preventable, caused physical harm, 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 death experiences can cause a particularly intense acute stress response that can develop into prolonged grief if not managed appropriately.

Grieving a Traumatic Loss

The first thing to keep in mind about experiencing grief after a traumatic loss is that you may have thoughts of suicide or "just not being here." For some, this may come as a shock. For those of you that have had these thoughts, we ask that you talk to someone immediately. Unfortunately, these feelings are common when we have experienced this type of loss. Below is a way for you to contact someone immediately when or if these thoughts occur.

National Suicide Prevention
800.273.TALK (8255)
www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Crisis Text Line
741741
www.crisistextline.org

National Domestic Violence Hotline
1.800.799.SAFE (7233)
www.thehotline.org

Trevor Project: Crisis and Suicide Prevention for LGBTQ Youth
866.488.7386
www.thetrevorproject.org

What does this type of 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 normal 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 that died in violent circumstances, 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 that died. Feelings 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 going crazy. These are uncomfortable feelings that may cause you to avoid seeking help.

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 associated with death by 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: Because suicide is a personal decision to no longer live, survivors often feel rejected or abandoned. 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. 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, and 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. The decision to die was under their control and was their personal choice.

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 that died.

Fear: It is common for families that have experienced a death by suicide to have intense fear about it happening again. If the person 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.

Death by Overdose

If you have experienced a death of a loved one from an overdose or substance abuse, your grief reactions will be similar to a death by suicide. However, specific reactions like blame and guilt are slightly different. Because substance abuse can have repeated trauma and family conflict events, there may be more rumination about what could prevent the overdose or help the person survive. If the person was struggling with addiction for a prolonged period, feelings of relief might even occur. However,

these feelings can 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. Therefore, these unique situations require unique support that may require a specialist or a specific agency's support. When seeking support, it is helpful to describe the type of loss as traumatic to help the right professional.

Things I want to remember...

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 experience grief the same way an adult does, except they express their grief differently. Depending on the child's age, their understanding and response to grief will be different and change over time. One of the changes that can happen between ages 3 and 7, because grief is so different from adult grief.

Preschool—Children in preschool or younger than the age of 5 do not have an understanding of time and a general ability to think of their world outside of themselves. Depending on the person who died, their expression of grief may be sporadic. Young children often express grief through behavior rather than words. One moment, they may become sad and ask a direct question about the person who died. Within minutes, they will be right back to playing. For a parent supporting a grieving child, this can become confusing. The key is to allow the child to grieve and recognize 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.

Elementary School—Once a child begins elementary school, their reactions to grief changes quite a bit. They begin to recognize the finality of death and may start to ask 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 also is 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," provide them with an understanding that 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 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 child grieving may have difficulty getting their own emotional needs met. And, 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.

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. Moreover, we can also overdo the nurturing, and 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 feels 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 a lot of discomfort and many times, 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 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. Be careful with offering advice. Even in the best of times, advice is annoying. Being supportive means not passing judgment and 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. People need to be heard and understood and validated. Offering advice may be experienced as minimizing their suffering.

Step 4. Use the person's name. 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, well, you can always 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.

The 11 Tenets of Companioning

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

1. Companioning is about being present to another person's pain; it is not about taking away the pain.
2. Companioning 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. Companioning is about honoring the spirit; it is not about focusing on the intellect.
4. Companioning is about listening with the heart; it is not about analyzing with the head.
5. Companioning is about bearing witness to the struggles of others; it is not about judging or directing these struggles.
6. Companioning is about walking alongside; it is not about leading or being led.
7. Companioning means discovering the gifts of sacred silence; it does not mean filling up every moment with words.
8. Companioning the bereaved is about being still; it is not about frantic movement forward.
9. Companioning is about respecting disorder and confusion; it is not about imposing order and logic.
10. Companioning is about learning from others; it is not about teaching them.
11. Companioning is about curiosity; it is not about expertise.

PART 5—Other Types of Grief

Loss of a Pet

Losing a pet is painful to experience but 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 grief 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 with our pets and they love us no matter our faults. Give yourself time and a place 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...

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Glossary of Terms: Retrieved from StatPearls

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.

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

Anticipatory Grief is a response to an expected loss. It affects both the person diagnosed with a terminal illness as well as their families.

Disenfranchised grief as defined by Kenneth Doka (1989) is a "grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported." Physicians regularly encounter losses in the form of patient deaths. Grief in healthcare providers is unsanctioned and may play a role in physician burnout. To adequately address the crisis on physician burnout, we need to address the under-recognized role of grief in the physician's clinical experience.

Takosubo Cardiomyopathy (Broken Heart Syndrome): is a weakening of the left ventricle caused by severe emotional or physical stress such as loss of a loved one, sudden illness, a serious accident, or a natural disaster (*e.g.*, earthquake). It almost exclusively occurs in women and resolves within a month.

Things I want to remember...

Things I want to remember...

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let's talk about it

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