

Understanding and navigating grief

In the face of grief impacting your life, it becomes crucial to prioritize your well-being. This booklet offers valuable insights and practical strategies for practicing self-care in the aftermath of bereavement.

Understanding grief as a process

Grief is a series of responses necessary for forming a new and integrated identity after a significant loss. The process of grief teaches endurance, friendship, love, character, resilience, and provides insights into one's core identity. While death may implode your life, grief has the transformative power to put it back together. Seek out supportive communities, practice self-compassion, and remember that, over time, grief can become more manageable with the right support systems in place.



Common reactions to grief

It's important to acknowledge that reactions to critical incidents vary widely among individuals. No one involved in a critical incident remains untouched by it. Profound sadness, grief, and anger are normal responses to an abnormal event. These reactions may occur during or soon after the incident, or they can be delayed for a few weeks. Common responses include:



Intense sadness

Profound feelings of sadness are common in grief. Crying, longing for the person or thing lost, and feeling empty are typical reactions.



Physical symptoms

Grief can manifest physically, leading to fatigue, changes in appetite, sleep disturbances, and other bodily reactions.



Social withdrawal

Some people withdraw from social activities and isolate themselves while grieving.



Spiritual and existential questions

Grief can prompt individuals to contemplate the meaning of life, death, and their own existence.



Mental and emotional challenges

Grief may cause difficulty concentrating, making decisions, and experiencing a wide range of emotions, including anger, guilt, anxiety, and even relief.





5 stages of grief

In 1969, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross introduced the renowned five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Initially designed to help individuals cope with their impending death, these stages have since been embraced by bereavement as a framework for understanding the experiences of those who have lost a loved one. Beyond that, since 2000, more and more companies have also adopted this model to shed light on reactions to change and loss.

- 1. Denial**
Initially, many individuals struggle to accept the reality of the loss, experiencing shock and numbness as a defence mechanism to shield themselves from its full impact.
- 2. Anger**
As the loss becomes more tangible, people may wrestle with feelings of anger. This anger can be directed towards themselves, others, or even the person they've lost.
- 3. Bargaining**
During this stage, individuals may engage in internal bargaining, seeking ways to reverse or mitigate the loss. Guilt and regret over unfinished matters may arise.
- 4. Depression**
A sense of sadness and despair often descends as individuals come to terms with the depth of their loss. This phase can be emotionally taxing and may lead to feelings of isolation.
- 5. Acceptance**
Over time, individuals begin to acknowledge the reality of the loss and embark on a path towards moving forward. Acceptance doesn't entail forgetting or completely overcoming the loss but finding a way to coexist with it.

Grief and support systems

Grief becomes more manageable and less intense with support systems and a caring community of family and friends. Connecting with others is crucial, even though it may be the last thing you feel like doing. Reach out to people who understand your grief, and don't hesitate to seek professional counselling support.



Seek support

Reach out to friends, family, and support groups who can provide emotional comfort and a listening ear. Medical Student Support can assist you with information about counselling resources, how to manage absences and your program commitments.



Self-care during grief

Self-care during difficult times means going back to the basics, including establishing a daily routine and practicing self-compassion. Engage in healthy self-care practices that nourish you emotionally, physically, spiritually, and intellectually. Identify activities that bring you joy, relief, and rest.



Daily routine

Establishing a daily routine is essential for stability. Attend to basic needs, such as showering, eating, and studying when possible. Notify your necessary absences due to grief by following the Medical Program Participation Guidelines - Medical School - University of Queensland (uq.edu.au) and submitting a notification of absence. For extended absences, get in touch with Medical School Student Support to discuss necessary documentation and a learning plan.



Self-compassion

Allow yourself the necessary space to experience the pain of grief and permit breaks when needed. Extend to yourself the same level of compassion you would readily offer a loved one. Recognise that grieving is a process that unfolds over time.

Understand that there is no prescribed right or wrong way to grieve; each person's journey is distinct. Grief follows no fixed timeline, so grant yourself the freedom to heal at your own pace, avoiding the pressure to rush through the process.

Take dedicated moments to express your emotions—whether through journaling, creative pursuits, or engaging in activities that aid in processing your feelings. This intentional self-expression can contribute significantly to your healing journey.



Physical wellbeing

Monitor your sleep patterns, as lack of sleep can impact your immune system, and make adjustments to ensure you are getting adequate rest. Understand that turning to comfort foods is a natural response, but balance is key. Drink plenty of water and avoid excessive alcohol consumption as it is a depressant. Engage in regular exercise to help reduce tension associated with grief.



Mindfulness and emotional wellbeing

Practice mindful breathing to switch from the flight-or-fight stress response, bringing you into the present moment and boosting overall wellbeing.



Memorialise and commemorate

Find meaningful ways to remember and honour the person you've lost. This can include creating rituals, setting up a memorial, or supporting a cause in their name.



Professional help

Consider therapy or counselling if grief becomes overwhelming or persistent. A mental health professional can offer guidance and coping strategies (see the resources listed on the next page).

When to seek professional help

1. Grief becomes overwhelming and persistent, significantly disrupting daily life.
2. You have thoughts of self-harm or suicide.
3. Essential daily functions, such as eating or sleeping, become challenging or impossible.
4. You resort to substance abuse as a means of coping with grief.
5. If you find your studies are impacted and you cannot focus

Always remember that grief is an intensely personal journey. Practice kindness and patience with yourself throughout this challenging period. Seeking help and support when needed is entirely acceptable, and the healing process has no rigid timeline. Embrace patience and gentleness, acknowledging that experiencing both good and bad days is entirely normal.



Support options for MD students

Mental health and support:
counselling



UniWellbeing
course



Self-help resources:
managing grief



Self-help resources:
wellbeing



Doctor's Health Advisory
Service 24/7 Helpline*
07 3833 4352



Support to assist you
in your studies**



* for doctors and medical students

** Consider exam adjustments, extensions for assignments, occasional absences to attend medical appointments and any other reason that may be relevant to support you during rotations. To get a Student Access Plan (SAP) and exam adjustments, you will need to make an appointment with a Student Adviser.

External Supports



[Beyond Blue](#)

Provides Australians with information and support to improve their mental health. Call 1300 22 46 36 or visit beyondblue.org.au for more information.



[Lifeline Australia](#)

Provides Australians experiencing a personal crisis with access to 24-hour crisis support. Call 13 11 14 or visit lifeline.org.au for more information.



[GriefLine](#)

Listens, cares and supports people experiencing loss and grief, at any stage in life. Call 1300 845... 8am to 8pm AEST, weekdays.



[MensLine Australia](#)

Is a professional telephone and online support and information service for Australian men. Call 1300 78 99 78, 24 hours / 7 days a week.



[Kids Helpline](#)

Is a free 24/7, confidential and private counselling service Australia wide specifically for children and young people aged 5 to 25 years. Call 1800 55 1800.

