



CANCERcare®

800-813-HOPE (4673)  
info@cancercaare.org  
www.cancercaare.org

# fact sheet

## GRIEF AND HEALING: COPING WITH THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE

The death of a loved one can change your world forever. Grief is a natural reaction to loss; it can be felt emotionally, physically and spiritually. Everyone copes with loss differently, and you will process grief in your own individual way, in your own time. This fact sheet will provide you with ways to better understand your grief and some of the feelings you may be experiencing.

### COPING WITH FEELINGS RAISED BY GRIEF

People coping with the loss of a loved one often describe the experience as an “emotional roller coaster.” Some of the feelings that may come up include numbness, denial, disbelief, anger, sadness or fear. Although these feelings are normal and natural, they can still feel unfamiliar and uncomfortable. It is important to treat yourself with compassion as you journey down this path.

The grieving process is unpredictable; your feelings may change from day to day or even minute to minute. Many people find it helpful to identify the feelings they are experiencing and talk about them. Others find it helpful to explore their feelings in a journal. Journaling can be cathartic and may allow you to take note of your growth that you may not have otherwise recognized. What is important in the grief process is that you grieve in your own personal way—a way that helps you heal.

### CARING FOR YOURSELF

**It is important to take care of yourself and have support during the grief process.** Here are some suggestions for self-care:

**Eat nutritious foods.** Keeping a balanced diet is an important part of taking care of yourself. Include fruits and vegetables in your meals. Nuts, yogurt and peanut butter sandwiches are easy snacks with lots of protein that will keep your energy level up.



**Get plenty of rest.** You may find yourself more tired than usual. Try to get enough sleep and take naps when you need them. If you find your sleep pattern is compromised, look into some of the effective sleep apps available on smart phones, or discuss sleep hygiene methods with your doctor or social worker.

**Practice relaxation techniques such as guided imagery, meditation or coloring.** These techniques can help reduce stress, lower your blood pressure and boost your immune system

**Stay active.** Experts recommend exercising for at least 30 minutes each day. Activities can include walking quickly, jogging or riding a bike. Keep in mind that you do not have to set aside a lot of time to exercise; you can work it into your day. You will even reap benefits just by carving out ten minute increments to do light exercise throughout your day.

(over)

**Be gentle with yourself.** You may perhaps feel you could have done something differently. Instead, try to focus on the positive and caring things you did for your loved one.

**Incorporate gratitude into your grief.** Over time, you may discover deep feelings of being thankful and grateful that your loved one was part of your life. These feelings can be an integral part of healing.

Most of all, keep in mind that it is important to be patient. Grief cannot be rushed.

## WHAT ARE SOME STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO CARE FOR YOURSELF?

**Create a support network.** It is important to surround yourself with supportive people who care about you and will listen to your story. Surrounding yourself with these people can help you heal and cope with grief. Find friends, family members, coworkers, neighbors and others with whom you feel comfortable sharing your thoughts, feelings or experiences.

Your loved one's team of doctors, nurses and social workers can be valuable sources of support as you cope with grief and loss. Additionally, oncology social workers are licensed professionals who counsel people affected by cancer, providing emotional support and helping people access practical assistance, including bereavement counseling.

## MAINTAIN A CONNECTION WITH YOUR LOVED ONE

The intense pain you feel as you grieve lessens as time passes. Just remember that you will adjust and find ways to manage the different life that has been created by the loss you are experiencing. It is natural to experience a sense of peace and calm after a period of mourning and sadness. These feelings, however, do not mean you have "gotten over" your loved one's death or forgotten about him or her. Rather, healing is about feeling a continued bond with a loved one after they die. There are many ways to keep a loved one's memory alive in your mind and heart. For example, you might:

- Share a memory or story with a friend or family member
- Listen to music that you and your loved one enjoyed
- Set aside a time each day to think about your loved one

- Frame and display a favorite photograph
- Plant a tree or flowers in memory of your loved one
- Do a kind deed in his or her name

## HOW HAVE THE PEOPLE IN YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK HELPED YOU?

**Accept help.** People in your support network may want to help out with practical tasks as a way of expressing their concern. Be open to accepting their help, and do not be afraid to reach out for help when you need it. Your support team may want to help out by:

- Preparing meals
- Shopping for groceries
- Offering child care
- Pitching in with household chores

The people in your support network can also help simply by spending quality time with you. Remember, your friends and family most likely want to be of help. Letting others help you is a gift that you give to them. It is likely that they are grieving as well. Grief is a journey that takes time, patience, kindness, self-compassion and an open heart.

## CancerCare® Can Help

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include case management, counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by master's-prepared oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit [www.cancercares.org](http://www.cancercares.org) or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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*Edited by Claire Grainger, LCSW, OSW-C  
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National Office • 275 Seventh Avenue • New York, NY 10001

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