

Supporting someone who is grieving

When a friend, relative or colleague is grieving it is natural to want to offer your support. Yet, we often feel very uncertain about what we can do to help. There is a lot of hesitancy and discomfort around loss and grief and this can leave many of us unsure how best to support someone who is grieving. This factsheet aims to offer some guidance.

What is grief?

Grief is the human response to change and loss in our lives, such as the death of someone we love. It is a natural and normal response, which has a physical impact on our bodies as well affecting our emotions and our thinking. Grief challenges the way we think about ourselves and the world, and influences our spirituality and relationships.

How do we express grief?

Each of us expresses grief in unique and personal ways. We respond differently to the physical impacts, the emotional turmoil and the challenges to our worldview. Some of us openly express our hurt, while others withdraw. It is important to remember that grief is a normal and natural response and that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. However, here are some (not an exhaustive list) of the reactions someone who is grieving may experience.

Emotions that people may feel ...

- Anxiety, fretfulness and feeling emotionally overwhelmed
- Anger, frustration or disillusionment
- Loneliness and isolation

Thoughts that people may have ...

- Disbelief
- Confusion
- Sense of presence
- Preoccupation

Behaviours that people may show ...

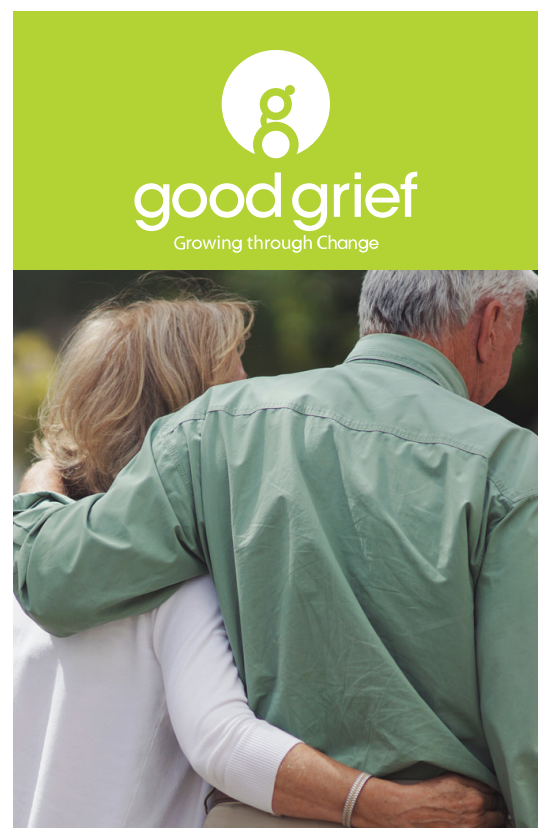
- Searching and calling out
- Restless over-activity
- Absentmindedness
- Visiting places and carrying objects
- Avoiding reminders

Physical Reactions that people may experience ...

- Sleep and appetite changes
- Tightness in chest and throat and breathlessness
- Lack of energy

The grief process

Grief is a challenging and complex time of hurt, but it is a normal part of life. It is important to remember that someone who is grieving is not 'unwell.' We can and do cope with grief, but we do best when we feel safe, supported and understand what is happening to us. In thinking about how best to support someone who is grieving it can be helpful to return to the definition of grief above - the idea that grief can be experienced for many people as a process or journey



At Good Grief we find J. William Worden's grief theory very helpful for making sense of this journey. Worden has identified that the grief process involves four key tasks. At Good Grief we have adapted these tasks slightly to take account of the wide range of losses we grieve for in life in addition to bereavement:

1. To accept the reality of the loss
2. To process the pain of grief
3. To adjust to a changed world after the loss
4. To find an enduring connection with what has been lost while embarking on a new life

It is important to understand that the four tasks are not steps or stages. Although time is an important healer, someone who is grieving will not move through the tasks automatically. Actively engaging with each task may help. The tasks can be approached in any order, and each of us will tackle them in our own time and own way. It is important not to put a time limit or pass judgement on someone else's grief journey.

How to support someone who is grieving

If we think of grief as a personal journey, our role in supporting someone who is grieving may differ depending upon our relationship with them. When supporting a partner, a close relative or close friend, it is likely we will walk side by side with them on their journey. For others we may offer support a little more from the sidelines. Yet, whatever our relationship to the person who is grieving, our role is to make ourselves available when they need to talk things over or reflect, and to encourage and support them when the going gets tough.

What support does someone who is grieving need?

They need:

- warm, open communication to talk through and make sense of what has happened and their reactions to it, repeatedly and without judgement.
- opportunities to come to understand the grief process and reflect on their own journey.
- space to express a wide range of emotions (such as sadness, anger, fear, guilt and humour).
- opportunities to take 'time out' from their responsibilities to focus on their grief or to refresh themselves.
- offers of support that fit with their circumstances – this may include practical domestic support, such as preparing meals, cleaning, looking after pets, transporting children to school or after-school activities, or baby-sitting.
- someone who checks in with them regularly to see how they are coping over time.

It is important to take your lead from the person who is grieving. Some people will appreciate more help and more frequent opportunities to talk, while others may find it intrusive. Be guided by the person and where they are on their journey, bearing in mind that their needs may change over time. Understand they are hurting and try to remain open, warm and available for if or when they need you.



Additional Support

Grief is a normal and natural response to the hurt people feel when they lose something or someone they love. Sometimes people need a little extra support when they are grieving. Two websites that may be of help and the bookshops at acgb.org.au and doug.org and don't hesitate to recommend individual professional support through their GP.

