

Actions To Cope With Loss

The following actions may be helpful to you as you learn to adjust to life after the loss of your loved one.

1. Express Emotion

Sadness, anger, fear, loneliness, guilt and a few dozen other emotions are common to bereaved people. You might even think of grief as a "collision of emotions" with all of these feelings clamoring for expression at once. Cry when you feel like crying, talk with a supportive friend or professional, and memorialize your loved one in the ways that seem helpful to you. Keeping a journal can be a meaningful way to express emotion, too; try beginning with a phrase like, "Today, I felt the most angry (or lonely or sad or scared) when..."

Keep in mind, however, there are different styles of grieving. Some people grieve primarily by taking adaptive action, getting involved in projects, and describing their experience in very cognitive terms. Others are intensely emotional in the ways they grieve, experiencing the full onslaught of feelings, and wanting to talk out the very deep emotions they experience. Most people grieve somewhere between these extremes.

2. Write Things Down

Most bereaved people have difficulty with focus and concentration, which is one of the reasons counselors recommend against making quick, life-altering decisions like changing jobs or selling your home. Instead, keep a journal of what you are thinking and feeling. One bereaved woman kept a phone log with notes about the calls she made and received, with whom she talked, and pertinent details about the conversation. Make lists of both the little things and the big things you need to accomplish, and you'll find it easier to keep up with tasks when your memory fails. And making a "to do" list in the evening before retiring to bed might even help improve your sleep.

3. Look After Your Physical Well-Being

Bereavement impacts us not only psychologically but also physically. You might have noticed changes in your appetite or sleep patterns, unremitting tears, or the familiar "lump in the throat." Fatigue is a likely companion for you, and you might notice greater frequency of illness. All of these are normal because grief has powerful physical impacts. Pay attention to your nutrition, eating plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables and drinking lots of water. Reduce or eliminate caffeine, especially if you are having trouble sleeping. Begin or resume an exercise regimen in consultation with your health professional. A complete check-up is in order in the early months of grief, and when you see the doctor, make sure to mention any physical symptoms that concern you.

4. Avoid Withdrawal and Busy-ness

In grief, some people tend to over-schedule themselves, hoping, it seems, to "stay busy," while others tend to withdraw completely from relationships and activities formerly enjoyed. Neither extreme will prove helpful. Instead, be creative with some of your alone time. View photo albums and write in your journal. Reach out to others by telephone, even when they don't call you. Don't try to schedule every moment of the day; it is a vain hope to think you can stay busy enough to not think about your loss.

5. Connect With Others

Grief does not work when we try to go it alone. Instead, entrust your story to supportive people in your family, in your community, among mental health professionals and in support groups. Something happens when we connect with others. We gain a sense of how life was changed by this death and pick up useful perspectives from people who have perhaps walked a bit further in loss. And reaching out to others with your story might just encourage someone else who hasn't walked as far as a grieving person as you have.

6. Explore Faith

A loved one's death raises questions about the meaning of life and makes us contemplate what happens after this life. Even if you haven't considered yourself to be particularly spiritual or religious, this death might have you asking questions you had not previously pondered. And if you are connected to a faith community, you might be wondering about some of the beliefs you have held dear. In any case, spiritual reading, prayer and meditation, conversations with a spiritual leader, and worship can be helpful in the grief process. Seek out the counsel of others whose spiritual life you trust.

7. Participate in Memorial Ceremonies

The memorial service, wake, vigil service, visitation and burial/committal provide some of the most meaningful opportunities to begin the bereavement process. Funerals provide many unparalleled benefits to bereaved family members and friends, a fact undisputed by the professional bereavement caregiving community.