

CHRISTI
CENTER 

Always Here After Your Loss

Coping *with* Grief



The Experience of Grief



“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

MATHEW 5:4

Most people are not prepared for the grief journey, which at times can be devastating, frightening, and lonely. It may also seem as though there is no respite, and no end to the intense feelings that you experience.

The grief journey has been compared to enduring a fierce storm at sea. The waves are peaked and close together. Eventually the sea becomes calmer, but occasionally the storm regroups, strengthening without warning. For several hours, days, or weeks, you may not experience grief; then grief resumes. At times it may seem as though you are taking one step forward and two steps back. You may think, do and say things that are very uncharacteristic. You are not alone in feeling this way.

People who are grieving have some experiences in common, but they also experience grief

uniquely. Although grief is a universal experience, no two people grieve alike - even within the same family. Different losses can each be grieved differently, even by the same person. Like a fingerprint, each person's grief experience has characteristics all its own. Just as there are no instructions on how to grieve, there is no timetable we can follow. You will adjust to a new life, taking it one day at a time.

Grief is often compounded by the stigma and discomfort surrounding death. Even well-meaning people in your life may want you to “get better” or “get over it.” You may feel pressure to suppress your grief instead of acknowledging it as a natural and necessary process. Your life is forever changed so you will not “get over it”. But you can find hope for healing, new meaning, and a new normal in your life after the death of a loved one.

Common Responses to Grief

While grief is a typical response to the death of a loved one, it sometimes causes reactions that can be unlike your normal behavior. These responses are understandable and do not indicate “insanity.” Pain may surface in the following forms:

Emotional

- Shock and disbelief
- Sadness and yearning
- Numbness
- Feeling disorganized or confused
- Wanting to be alone and yet feeling lonely
- Resentment towards those who have not experienced loss
- Anxiety, worry and fear
- Feelings of guilt or sense of failure
- Helplessness/hopelessness
- Irritability and anger at:
 - The situation
 - Others
 - Your loved one who died
 - God/your higher power
 - Medical personnel

Physical

- Change in sleep that may include bad dreams/nightmares
- Change in eating habits
- Pain with unknown causes – headaches, stomach problems, muscle pain, etc.
- Fatigue/lack of energy
- Sexual difficulties

Behavioral

- Lack of motivation
- Difficulty concentrating and/or remembering things
- Crying often
- Emotional outbursts
- Isolating self or avoiding others
- Abusing substances including alcohol, prescription medication, or street drugs as a way to cope
- Unnecessary risk taking

These are all common experiences of grief and may take an immense amount of energy to confront. If left unresolved through avoidance or denial, they can lead to prolonged or complicated grief. This in turn can significantly impact your health, marriage, friendships, job, or other areas of your life. Sharing with those who are on a similar journey is often a helpful way to recognize and avoid falling into a pattern of complicated grief and to begin to find a new normal.

If you are concerned about the number or intensity of your reactions, you may find it helpful to consult a professional who can help you in your grief journey. To help you find this support, we can provide you with a referral list.

Coping with Grief

Each grief and healing process is unique, and people cope with grief in many different ways. Here are a few things that might help you:

Accept Support

Seek out support and help from friends, family, support groups, professionals, or religious leaders. People may ask you, “What can I do?” or “tell me what you need.” Make a list and when the occasion arises, find someone who is able to provide the type of support you need (just being there, listening, talking, socializing, etc.) When someone offers you help, don’t be afraid to accept it.

Be Active

It can be helpful to schedule activities or make plans to have something to look forward to. Remember that you are healing and in doing so, you are allowed to have enjoyment in your life.

- **Exercise** - Can improve your overall health, mood/energy level, sleep quality, and is a safe way to release emotions.

- **Volunteer** - Do something to help others - in doing so you can often help yourself.
- **Socialize** - Share a meal with friends or spend time with others who have also experienced a loss.
- **Yoga** - Can help calm your mind with meditation and active practice.
- **Gardening** - Provides benefits such as relaxation, exercise, meditation, and connecting with nature.

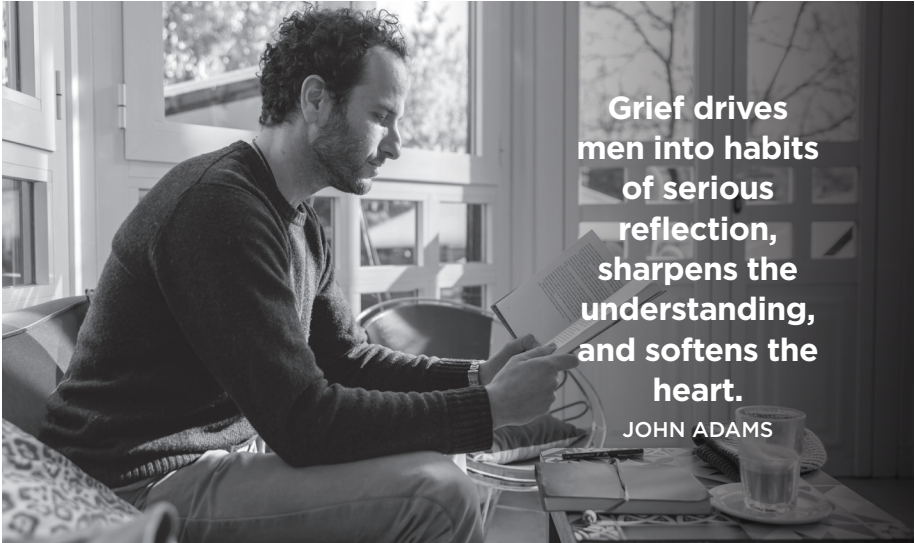
We offer ongoing opportunities to participate in these activities at The Christi Center. Please contact us or visit our website for a current list of activities.

Self-Care

Be kind to yourself and do things you enjoy. Rediscover past interests or learn something new.

- **Read** - There are many helpful books on grief and loss. You could also find quotes or poems that are helpful to you. The Christi Center has a resource library filled with many books that our clients have found helpful in the grief journey and shared with us. You are welcome to stop by and borrow materials even if





Grief drives men into habits of serious reflection, sharpens the understanding, and softens the heart.

JOHN ADAMS

you do not attend groups at the Center.

- **Journal** - It may be helpful to reflect on thoughts and feelings to increase understanding of your grief reactions.
- **Health** - Adequate sleep and nutrition are important for healing.

Commemorate

Many people find comfort in staying connected to loved ones by honoring their memory. There are many ways you can do this:

- Pass on an heirloom of your loved one.
- Plant a tree or other living monument.
- Try a new creative activity for a memorial such as; making a quilt, mosaic, painting, sculpture, stain glass, etc. that allows you to create a memory of your loved one.
- Create a memory box filled with objects representing your loved one.
- Collect favorite stories about your loved one and put them into a book.
- Write a blog or develop a memorial page/website.
- Put your online photos in a slideshow with their favorite songs or songs that mean something to you on your grief journey.
- Make a playlist of your loved ones favorite songs.
- Enjoy your loved one's favorite food.
- Write or say a toast, meditation or a prayer for your loved one.
- Write a letter to your loved one.
- Light a candle in their memory.

Things To Remember While Grieving

Grief is hard work

The expression “grief work” is very true. Working through the experience of grief may be the hardest work that you will ever do, but you can find healing.

Understanding is essential to healing

The expression of grief is essential for good emotional and physical health, even though it may be painful and difficult. There is no way under, over, or around your grief. Although grief may hurt, you must go through it. Emotions are ever changing and it is important to allow them to move through you.

Avoid major decisions


You should avoid making major decisions (such as moving, changing jobs, etc.) unless absolutely necessary during the early stages of grief when judgment is cloudy.

Grief has no timetable

Grief is a journey and the length is different for everyone. It helps to take life one minute, one hour and one day at a time.

You will heal

People have a natural inclination to heal. But be patient with yourself - healing from grief takes time.



Although the
world is full
of suffering,
it is full
also of the
overcoming
of it.

HELEN KELLER

What You Can Do To Help A Grieving Person

Grieving people need love, patience, and ongoing support. Often times, there is an outpouring of support immediately after the loss and then everyone goes back to life as normal, while the grieving person is left alone to figure out their new normal - without their loved one. There are lots of things family and friends can do to support people throughout their grief journey.

Be Present

The presence of a friend or family member is worth more than words. People often question or feel uncomfortable about what to say to a grieving person. There is no one right thing to say and sometimes the best thing you can offer is just letting them know that you are there whether to talk, sit, cry, yell or simply be silent. Do not avoid a grieving person because of your own discomfort. You do not need to say anything profound. Just showing up and sitting with the griever is helpful.

Listen

The bereaved sometimes just want to be asked and talk about the person who died, as well as their memories and feelings about what happened. Be there to listen. Using the loved one's name can be comforting, because it lets the

grieving person know nothing is off-limits.

Reach Out

Keep in touch with those who have lost loved ones by calling, visiting, sending cards and including them in activities. Often, people tell a grieving person to "call if you need anything", but remember that those in grief are often too overwhelmed to know what they need. Checking in periodically and offering specific services that they may need, such as mowing the lawn, cooking meals, bringing the kids to school, etc. will relieve them of the burden of making the request.

Acknowledge the Right to Grieve

Allow the bereaved to express a whole range of emotions. They may not want to cry, or need to cry. Anger, resentment, and anxiety are also common reactions. Be accepting and supportive of changing moods without judgement.

Comfort with a Touch

If appropriate, the emotional strength of a good hug can do wonders. Always be aware of what form of touch is appropriate for each person. The touch of a hand, a pat on the back or a hug can all be meaningful ways to show you care.

Talking with Children about Death and Loss

General Guidelines

- Speak simply and honestly. Explain clearly that death is the end and the person will not come back.
- Use concrete words like dead, died, or the body stopped working. Avoid the use of metaphors such as, “Daddy went to sleep,” “We lost mom,” “Grandpa passed away,” “Annie went for a long trip,” “He went to sleep.”
- Talk about the loss whenever your child brings up the subject. Do not force your child to talk about the death. Children can only process so much information at a time and what they can’t understand now may be brought up later.
- Let their questions lead the discussion. They’ll let you know when they are ready for more. Be patient with repeated questions.
- “I don’t know” is an okay answer to your child’s question. Ask them, “What do you think?” to give them permission to express their own thoughts and concerns.
- Don’t assume that children are too young to understand death or be impacted by it.
- Children grieve the secondary losses (different homes, new schools, new routines, etc.) that come with the loss of a loved one. They may seem more focused or upset about these than the death loss.
- Children are quick to blame themselves for the death and can secretly carry this guilt so reassure them they did not cause the death through their thoughts or actions.
- A grieving child needs to feel secure and taken care of with consistent hugs, kisses, and warmth. Be honest with your child about who will take care of him or her in the event of your death.
- Let your child know that crying is okay. Don’t be afraid to cry in front of them...it gives your child permission to cry.
- Try to maintain routine, rules and limits in order to provide a sense of security for the child. Their world can feel turned upside down so give them lots



of choices to feel a sense of control.

- Children are perceiving the emotions around them...label them, describe them, discuss them.
- Help them find ways to express and comfort themselves such as art, reading, writing, music, and physical activities. Help your child recognize their support network so they have multiple people to turn to when in need.
- Children grieve more intermittently than adults...one minute they are sad and the next minute they are playing and laughing.
- Children will revisit losses over their lifespan so what can seem like a step back is actually part of the process.

HOW TO HELP A GRIEVING CHILD

Provide Clear and Truthful Information

- Remember that you are the best person to hear information from because they feel safe with you
- Find a way to tell them what happened that is age-appropriate
- Create a plan with your family on how to talk about the death with others

Involve Children in Mourning and Rituals

- Talk about burial, memorial, cremation, etc.
- Involve children as much as possible in the process
- Never force children to participate if they do not want to

Continue Routines

- Provide opportunities for their same routine. Children thrive in routine, so as much as possible allow them to participate in school, camps, etc.
- Provide opportunities to take “mental health” breaks if they choose that they cannot participate in their normal routine
- Provide other opportunities that may encourage expression of their emotions, such as therapy, support groups, art camp

Serve as a Healthy Role Model for Grief

- Find time to care for yourself as an individual.
- Recognize you can’t do it all

Encourage Expression of Feelings and Thoughts

- Encourage children to find ways to express themselves: through talking, art, journaling, sports
- Express your own emotions of grief and model that it is okay to express your feelings
- Find ways that fit your children’s needs – note that if you have multiple children, they may all be different

Help the Child Continue Being Connected

- Children fear loss of memories
- Avoid secondary losses as much as possible (throwing out old possessions, moving, changes in school)
- Provide opportunities to take time and remember your loved one

Listen!

- Take time to play with them and be there for them
- Honor your child and family’s timetable. Grief is very unique
- Remember that grief is often revisited over each developmental period
- Continue to support your child as it arises

Death from a Child's Point of View

Children re-grieve at each developmental stage. What may feel like a step back is part of the process

INFANTS/TODDLERS

Child's Understanding

- No understanding of death
- Sense something is disruptive in their world
- Caregivers are behaving differently, or different people are taking care of them

Frequently Observed Behaviors

- Sleep disturbances such as frequent night waking or refusal to nap
- Not eating well
- Irritability or excessive crying
- Increased separation anxiety
- Increased need to be held or comforted

What Helps?

- Provide extra comfort...holding, rocking, eye contact, talking in a soft voice
- Offer a transitional object (blanket or stuffed animal)

PRESCHOOL (AGES 2-4)

Child's Understanding

- See the loss as temporary and not permanent
- May feel they have the "magical" power to wish someone back
- Confusion about what is real and not real
- Very egocentric and may feel like they are at fault
- Understanding is very literal and do not understand metaphors

Frequently Observed Behaviors

- Grieves in small increments
- Gaining verbal skills so it's hard to communicate feelings and thoughts
- Regression is normal (bed wetting, sleeping patterns, separation anxiety)
- Using play to work through their grief and take breaks from their grief

Death from a Child's Point of View (cont.)

SCHOOL AGE (AGES 5-7)

Child's Understanding

- Death is real but won't happen to them
- Usually able to understand death is final
- Death may be viewed as an actual person, spirit, or being
- Some will develop a preoccupation with "morbid" details

Frequently Observed Behaviors

- Many develop fears (separation, darkness, nightmares, etc.)
- Feeling may be shared or held in
- Coping through the gathering of information
- Regression may occur
- May see changes in behavior with aggression or being withdrawn

SCHOOL AGE (AGES 7-11)

Child's Understanding

- Understands death as permanent and irreversible
- May question their own mortality
- May be concerned about what happens after a person dies

Frequently Observed Behaviors

- Feelings may be expressed or held in...often "seem" to be doing well

- May develop a "mask" of uncaring or joking
- Regression still common
- Relationships with friends becoming more important
- May take on the role of the person who died
- May see changes in behavior, mood, grades, and relationships

ADOLESCENTS (AGES 12+)

Child's Understanding

- Full awareness of death but only beginning to grapple with it spiritually
- Possible survivor guilt
- Often try to make meaning out of the loss

Frequently Observed Behaviors

- Can test their own mortality with increased risk-taking behaviors
- Depression and regression common
- Feel that life is unfair and can act out, withdraw, express anger
- Focus on relationships outside the family
- Striving for independence yet often fragile inside their grief

What To Say To A Grieving Person

Sometimes when people are trying to be helpful or are unsure what to say to a grieving person, they make statements that are not helpful. These types of comments can dismiss the emotions associated with grief. It is okay for a grieving person to feel a whole range of emotions, and it is important to acknowledge them. Since each person grieves differently, there is no one right thing to say or do., but consider the following:

Common well-intentioned remarks	Why they're not helpful	Alternatives to consider
Saying nothing at all.	This is actually one of the worst things you can do because it ignores the grieving person's pain.	I'm not sure what to say, but I want you know I'm here for you.
It was God's will, God will never give you more than you can handle, maybe God is trying to teach you something, God needed an angel, God needs him/her more than you do, etc.	Even if the person's faith includes God, they are relying on their own perception of faith or may even be struggling to reconcile loss and faith. Don't complicate things by presuming to know God's intentions.	This must be so hard for you. It's hard to understand why these things happen.
I know just how you feel.	Even if you've experienced a loss, each person's loss is different so you can't know exactly how the person feels.	I can only imagine how you feel. Can you tell me more?

Common well-intentioned remarks

Why they're not helpful

Alternatives to consider

He/she wouldn't have wanted you to be sad.

Sadness and anger are difficult enough. Don't introduce guilt into the grief process.

I can see you are sad and you miss him/her so much.

It has been three weeks/months/years since he/she died. Aren't you over it yet?

You never really "get over" a death. The pain subsides and you begin to heal. The time frame for this is different for every person, so do not impose time frames.

I'll be here for as long as you need me.

He/she lived a good, full life and it was his/her time to die.

Knowing that someone lived a full life does not make it any easier to say goodbye.

He/She will be missed.

You should be grateful for your other children, You'll get married again, etc.

One person cannot replace another. Making these statements discount the unique love they have for each individual.

I can tell how much you loved him/her.

Common well-intentioned remarks

Why they're not helpful

Alternatives to consider

He's in a better place, Just be happy he isn't in pain anymore, You must have some sense of relief after his long illness, etc.

The grieving person wants their loved one to be in their life, and their absence is felt heavily.

You must miss him terribly.

You need to be strong for your children, spouse, etc.

Hiding emotions is not helpful to anyone's grief process. It's ok to model normal grief for others who are grieving, too.

How are your kids/spouse doing with this?

You need to move on, You should stay busy, You should _____.

Each grief journey is different. It is not your place to suggest timetables or activities that would make the bereaved feel better.

Do what you need to do to grieve – I'll support you however I can.

Call me if you need anything.

Knowing what they need or asking for help may be overwhelming for a grieving person. Make specific suggestions and ask for permission to help.

Today looks like it is a hard day for you. Can I bring dinner by for you at 5?

Today is garbage day. Is it ok if I take your trash to the curb?

I know you have a lot going on. Could I pick up the kids afterschool and take them to the park for awhile?

How We Can Help

For over three decades, we have been connecting people grieving the death of a loved one with others who have experienced a similar loss through peer-based support groups. We offer open ended-support and a respect for grieving in your own way and on your own time frame. Our support groups include:

Adults

- Loss of a child
- Loss of a spouse
- Adult mixed loss (siblings, parents, other relatives, friends)
- Loss to suicide
- Loss to overdose
- Crime victims/loss to violent crime
- Men's group
- Mother's group
- Loss of spouse second stage/"Moving On"
- Williamson County group
- Young adults group

Youth

Kids Who Care helps grieving children and their families by providing:

- Semi-monthly groups in Austin for Kids (5-12) with concurrent groups for parents/guardians
- Semi-monthly groups for teens (13-19)
- Retreats
- Individual counseling onsite or online for youth (ages 5-17)





We help professionals and people in the community understand how grief can impact every area of a person's life.

In The Community

We help professionals and people in the community understand how grief can impact every area of a person's life. About one in ten people will experience unresolved or complicated grief, which is a very real and potentially devastating mental health issue. To promote awareness and early intervention, we offer:

- Information/referral
- Panels and presentations on grief and bereavement
- Healing activities and grief topics available on a seasonal basis at the Center
- Annual Holiday Remembrance Service

Our mission is to offer hope after the death of a loved one by providing support networks, community education and therapeutic activities that are free, peer-based and ongoing. Our vision is a community where no one has to grieve alone. We're always here for you after your loss.

Member Bill of Rights

When you become a part of the Christi Center you can expect the following:

- You have the right to responsible facilitation that keeps in mind the best interest of each individual and the group as a whole.
- You have the right to be free from financial obligations for peer support group services at The Christi Center.
- You have the right to know that your personal information and everything you share in group will be kept confidential by The Christi Center staff and facilitators unless someone suspects you are a danger to yourself or others, or if someone is hurting you.
- You have the right to know your group will be structured to end on time.
- You have the right to excuse yourself if you need to leave.
- You have the right to an appropriate amount of time to share in group.
- You have the right and responsibility to be an active member in your group. This can be in the form of sharing about your loss, listening actively, or learning from and supporting peers in your group.
- You have the right to know you are accepted and respected at The Christi Center for who you are regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, or any other beliefs.
- You have the right to know that there is no single right way to grieve.
- You have the right to know that we do not judge based on the relationship of loss or how you lost your loved one.
- You have the right to raise questions or concerns to a Christi Center staff member about your experience here.
- You have the right to be referred to other resources if you have needs that cannot be met by the services offered at The Christi Center.

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This Committee is comprised of clinicians from various disciplines and is responsible for assessing publications and trainings to support best practices in bereavement and peer support services.

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About The Christi Center

On October 26, 1985 Susan and Don Cox's lives were altered in an instant when a drunk driver killed their 20-year old daughter, Christi. Following her death, the Coxes and their 16-year old son, Sean Lanahan, found few affordable support options available to help them through their grief. They found their best source of support was others who had also experienced a loss. The family realized that not only did they need help navigating their new life without Christi, but there were many others in the community who had lost loved ones who also needed help. Two years later, in October of 1987, they established a nonprofit called For the Love of Christi (later renamed The Christi Center) to offer hope after the death of a loved one by providing support networks, community education and therapeutic activities that are free, peer-based and ongoing.

To join one of our support groups, please call us at 512-467-2600.

To learn more about us, visit us online at

christicenter.org

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