

HOW TO Weather Tough Times

The first step is simply realizing that there can be peace on the other side. We asked the experts for their best advice to help us cope with loss and navigate grief

by **ARRICCA ELIN SANSONE**

1. Grief arises in surprising situations.

You might feel it when you lose a job or a marriage, but you can also feel it when you are missing the ability to do something you love or even an unremarkable daily routine. “Any change or transition to a new phase of life can cause grief,” says Neda Gould, Ph.D., director of the Mindfulness Program at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. “Even retirement, usually thought of as a happy occasion, can trigger grief because the role and identity you had for so long has shifted.” Sometimes you may not even recognize that you’re feeling a loss. For instance, if someone close to you has dementia, you might mourn the person he or she once was.

2. You might show physical symptoms.

Grief isn’t only emotional, especially in severe cases: “You may have dramatic swings in weight or you may have insomnia, or sleep 12 hours a day and still feel tired,” says Edward T. Creagan, M.D., an emeritus professor at Mayo Clinic College of Medicine and the author of *Farewell: Vital End-of-Life Questions With*

Candid Answers. “You might experience a sort of brain fog, so you can’t find your keys or you’re going to the bank to get milk.” It’s part of your body’s attempt at processing your new reality.

3. Everyone has a different time line for grieving.

While you’ve likely heard of the classic stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance), not everyone experiences every stage or experiences them in the same order. “It’s OK for your grieving to be as unique as you are,” says Gould. You may be ready to date months after losing a spouse, or it could take years. At times you may backtrack and revisit emotions. “One challenge is that the rest of the world keeps moving,” says Helen Harris, Ed.D., an associate professor of social work at Baylor University. “But with loss, the whole first year can be a series of losses as the first anniversary, birthday and holiday pass.”

4. You may even grieve before a loss.

When you’re worried about your job stability or a parent with a terminal diagnosis,

you may feel the pain of grief before the actual event occurs. But it’s wise to try to avoid dwelling on the outcome in advance. “It’s difficult not to worry about the future, but the truth is you can’t deal with something until it happens,” says Marion Rudin Frank, Ed.D., a licensed private practice psychologist in Philadelphia. “You’re not living in the present if you’re looking ahead. You’re missing the moment with that person or whatever your present situation is. Breathe deeply and pull yourself back to the present.”

5. Other people may have unexpected reactions to your grief.

Maybe a person you thought would be there for you disappears. Perhaps a well-meaning family member says something hurtful. A dear friend may not get why you’re inconsolable over the loss of your dog because he’s never loved a pet. The bottom line is that you don’t need to live up to anyone else’s expectations for how you “should” be behaving. Save your energy for focusing on your own well-being. “There’s a stigma around grieving, and it’s very common for people to treat you

HOW TO TALK TO SOMEONE WHO’S GRIEVING

“Upbeat” pat phrases can seem disingenuous, advises Dr. Creagan, and may leave the impression that you don’t truly understand the magnitude of the person’s pain. When you have the opportunity to offer compassion, avoid well-intentioned but unhelpful platitudes.

INSTEAD OF THIS:

- “I know how you feel.”
- “At least he’s not suffering anymore.”
- “You’re young. You’ll get over it.”
- “You can get another dog/job/relationship.”
- “Just be strong.”

TRY THIS:

- “I’m sorry for your loss.”
- “You and your family are in my thoughts during this hard time.”
- “Whatever I say won’t erase your pain, but please know that I’m here for you if you need anything.”
- It’s OK to say nothing—just being present may be most helpful of all.

differently because your identity has changed in your social circle,” says M. Katherine Shear, M.D., founder and director of the Center for Complicated Grief at Columbia School of Social Work. “Don’t take it personally. With close friends, you can talk it out, but you can’t discuss your feelings with everyone.”

6. Rituals and symbolic actions matter.

That’s why we hold a memorial service after a death. “Rituals help us move into the next phase of our lives after a loss,” says Frank.

“They mark a transition.” Creating your own traditions may help you acknowledge that your life is evolving. If you always went out to dinner with your spouse on Friday nights, you may want to set up a standing date with your friends instead, says Dr. Shear. Or you may want to stay at home and make soup. Maybe you feel like buying your late sister’s favorite flowers this year on her birthday. But don’t decide what you will want to do next year, says Frank. While there is no formula that helps everyone, just doing *something* may help you navigate your grief.

7. Triggers may set you off long after your loss.

Just when you thought you were healed, something — a song, a movie or even a smell — can bring you right back to the early days of your grief journey. “Even 20 years later, memories can be triggered,” says Dr. Shear. “It’s natural. It’s something we should honor. When these memories come back, pause and look back and value that moment. Grief is the form love takes when we lose someone or something.”

8. The right support is crucial.

Whether it’s a member of the clergy, a therapist or a friend who just listens (without judging or giving

advice), find what works for you. “If you have chest pain, you see a cardiologist. If you have heartbreak, it’s no different — it’s not a sign of weakness to ask for help,” says Dr. Creagan. A loss-support group may be useful in helping you realize that you’re not alone. If you can’t work or function — if the house is a mess, you haven’t had a haircut in ages, you can’t stop blaming yourself for something you might have done differently, you’re completely avoiding thinking about the loss or you’re constantly ruminating — it’s probably time to seek professional help. Certainly if at any time you’re thinking about harming yourself, reach out for help — call 911.

9. You will feel happy again.

Eventually you’ll be able to accept that things will never be the same as they were before your loss. And that’s a good thing. “While the losses are challenging and painful, many people come out of it with a new perspective in how they approach relationships, have greater compassion for others, appreciate the small things and stay present in the moment,” says Gould. “When we understand that grieving is an inevitable phase of life, we can grow from it.” While we can’t change the experience, we can change how we relate to that experience. At some point the loss will become woven into your story and who you are, but the only way to get to the other side is to go through grief. Life isn’t going to be the same, but it can be good.

