When You Are Grieving
A Guide to Understanding Loss
If you’re reading this booklet, you’ve probably lost someone close to you and may be feeling a lot of strong or complicated emotions. Sometimes those who are grieving feel like something may be wrong with them. But, we want you to know that what you are feeling – whatever you may be feeling – is most likely normal.

Grief is the natural way we cope with loss. It is the combination of everything you feel when something or someone important to you is no longer in your life. Grief can leave you feeling exhausted, vulnerable and overwhelmed.

It may be hard to believe right now, but you can get through this. It will take time and patience, but the emotions you’re experiencing right now will not burden you forever. We hope this booklet will help you understand what you’re feeling so you can comprehend your grief and find comfort and healing.

REACH OUT IF YOU NEED HELP.

To learn more about our services, or to find out how we can help you or someone you know struggling with the loss of a loved one, call us today at 321.434.1744, or visit our website at HF.org/hospice.
Your Own Grief Journey

**As you begin your grief journey**, remember that you will be grieving in your own way. You are a unique person who had a unique relationship with the person who has passed away. The only one who knows what feels right for you in the midst of your grief is you.

You may have been taught that grief occurs in stages. Unfortunately, that’s not actually how grief works. There are no set stages of grief. One day you may know exactly where you are with your grief, and the next you could feel totally lost again.

This can make you feel anxious and out of control. These feelings are normal. Symptoms and emotions will often come in waves, some may be so intense it feels difficult to function and others will be much easier to handle.

You may not experience every symptom of grief mentioned in this booklet and that’s okay. There are parts of grief that many people share, but that does not mean you need to feel the same way.

**What you can do:**

- **Take as long or as short of time as you need to grieve.** There is no set timeline for grieving. It may take days, months or years.

- **Be gentle with yourself as you grieve.** Remember that grief is a process, not an occasion.

- **Know that it is normal to experience grief attacks.** Grief attacks are overwhelming waves of grief, triggered by things that remind you of your loved one, such as a song or a smell. They often come by surprise or they may hit you on special days, like birthdays or anniversaries. The first year may be difficult as you go through all the “firsts” without your loved one and fits of grief may be more frequent.
After the Loss

The days or weeks directly after your loved one’s passing can be hectic. For many, the first part of the grief journey involves family, visitors and planning, which can take a lot of time and energy. The stress of this in addition to your grief can easily cause you to feel overwhelmed.

The reality of your loss may not have completely hit you yet and it may seem unreal that your loved one is actually gone. You may feel like you are just going through the motions of daily life and it may be hard to take the time to grieve amidst all of the chaos.

For some, having a ritual such as a funeral, wake or memorial service can help bring closure. Some people prefer to have a small family get-together or make their own rituals. If there is no ceremony, you can find your own way to remember your loved one.

Keep plans for the ritual manageable and within your budget. Simplify things as much as you need to.

Reach out for help. Assign tasks to others, getting help from family, friends and the Hospice of Health First Bereavement community.

Be aware that preparing for even small rituals can be overwhelming. If you begin to feel overwhelmed, try taking things one small step at a time.

Give yourself time to acknowledge the loss. Spend some alone time to reflect whenever you need it.
The Physical Effects of Grief

Grief may affect you in unexpected ways. More than likely you anticipated feeling very sad, but there are often physical side effects that you may experience after you’ve lost a loved one. Some common symptoms include:

- Trouble sleeping
- Sleeping too much
- Eating too much
- Not eating enough
- Chest or stomach pain
- Headaches
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty remembering things

These are all common physical reactions to grief and experiencing them does not mean you are ill or that you’re going crazy. Physical symptoms should improve as your emotions level out. However, you should see your doctor if you are suffering from serious pain or prolonged pain. They can find out if this is stemming from grief or something else.

What you can do:

- **Rest.** Your body needs rest to withstand the physical symptoms of grief. If you can’t sleep, try drinking herbal teas or listening to soothing music to help you relax. Avoid taking sleeping pills every night.

- **Take it easy.** Don’t overwhelm yourself with a long to-do list. It may be hard for you to stay focused on tasks while you’re grieving, but be patient with yourself if you forget things.

- **Exercise regularly and eat a healthy diet.** Drink plenty of water. Healthy living helps both body and mind.

- **Cry.** Crying helps let the pain out. Tears help relieve stress, lower blood pressure and promote healing.

- **Avoid negative habits.** Alcohol and drug abuse, overeating, or other negative habits will only cover up grief, which delays the grieving process. It may be even harder to face the pain later. Seek help if you begin turning to these types of habits to handle your grief.
Emotional Effects of Grief

Just as each grief experience is unique, so are the emotions of grief. If there are others around you grieving the same loss, their feelings of grief may be completely different than yours. There is no right or wrong way to feel when you are grieving.

Allow yourself to feel all the emotions you need to feel and do your best not to ignore them. Also, don’t let others tell you how you should feel. Remember that whatever you are feeling is right for you.

There are many different emotions of grieving – too many to list here. Some common feelings shared by grieving people are:

Feelings of Frustration

It may be frustrating that as soon as you feel like you’ve moved forward in the grieving process, you get pushed back again. But this kind of back-and-forth is normal. Grief is an emotional journey, not an intellectual one, which means you can’t reason your way through it. Although it might feel terrible in the moment, letting yourself feel these different emotions will ultimately help you heal.

Feelings of Anger

You may be feeling angry with yourself, with the person who died, with someone else or with God. It’s okay to be angry; in fact, anger over loss is normal. Recognize your anger, then let it out in ways that do not hurt yourself or others. Scream in your car, hit a pillow or go for a walk or run to release anger.

Feelings of Shock

It is also common to not feel anything after you lose a loved one. You may feel stunned, lost or empty for a period of time. If you feel this way for a very long time, reach out for help.
Feelings of Frustration
You might feel relieved if your life had been put on hold while you were taking care of the person you’ve lost. Relief may also occur if you had a bad relationship with the person who died. If you feel relief, you might react by feeling guilty, but it’s okay to feel relieved.

Feelings of Guilt
You might feel guilty for something you did or did not do before the death. Acknowledge what you could have done differently, but also accept the fact that you cannot change what has happened. Try your best to let go of feelings of guilt and learn to forgive yourself.

Feelings of Isolation
Some people may feel ashamed about crying or showing emotion, but you don’t need to feel ashamed about grieving or try to hide your feelings. It is not a sign of weakness.

Sometimes others can become uncomfortable with your grief which could make you feel isolated or alone. This is especially true of those suffering from disenfranchised grief.

“Disenfranchised grief” happens when a person is deprived of the right to grieve or when others see the person’s loss as invalid. Examples include the loss of an unborn child, loss of a pet, loss of a partner in a non-traditional relationship or loss by death that is thought as shameful to others.

Every loss is valid and everybody has the right to grieve, no matter what the circumstance. If you feel alone in your grief, reach out. If the people in your life do not support your grief, call us today at 321.434.1744, or visit our website at HF.org/hospice.
Getting Back to Daily Life

You’ve stopped receiving flowers and phone calls as family and friends return to their daily routines, and now you’re faced with the challenge of getting back to your own life. But, how can you when life isn’t the same anymore?

After you lose someone close to you, it can be difficult to adjust to daily life. It may seem impossible just to face the day. Routines involving the person who died have been halted, and now you may dread those scheduled times.

You might become overwhelmed by tasks that used to be simple, or by tasks that are new to you. You may feel guilty for not appreciating the things your loved one used to do for you, or you may be angry that you had not learned how to do them before. But be patient with yourself and don’t be afraid to ask for help or to admit that you are feeling stressed.

What you can do:

- **When you are ready, try and find new, positive habits to fill your time.** Consider doing them during times you used to spend with the person who you’ve lost so you may be able to start looking forward to those times again.

- **Make a list of activities you really enjoy.** Make them simple and put them on your calendar at scheduled times. Some ideas you can try include: Meditating or doing yoga, going for a walk or exercising, reading an uplifting book, calling or visiting with a friend, watching your favorite show or working in a garden.

- **Be aware that grief can affect your judgement.** If you can, try to wait awhile after your loss before making important decisions such as moving or changing jobs.
When you are grieving, some people might not know exactly what to say to you. They may say things like “He/she’s in a better place now” or “everything happens for a reason,” making it appear that they are trying to downplay your pain.

For many people, death can be a touchy subject, since it brings up questions about the meaning of life and our existence. Some people may even turn away from you, which can leave you feeling alone and misunderstood.

**What you can do:**

- **Try not to take it personally.** If someone is not sensitive to your feelings, find people who will give you the support you need and who can empathize with how you are feeling.

- **Make a list of things you need help with.** Some people genuinely want to help but don’t know how. Consider sharing a list with them that describes how they can help you, including items such as:
  - **Please don’t judge me** or tell me I shouldn’t feel the way I do.
  - **Please be patient.** It’s going to take me some time to grieve.
  - **Please listen.** Sometimes all I need is to be heard.
  - **Please reach out.** Stop by, call, text, send a card, or email me.
  - **If you want to help, pick a task** that you’d like to help with and offer to do it.
Expressing Your Grief

Expressing grief is an important part of healing from loss. At first, the idea of this might seem too overwhelming; but you can try small ways of expressing your grief whenever you feel ready.

Talking about your feelings with a trusted friend, a counselor or a grief group is a healthy way to express grief. Even if you can’t make sense of it all right now, sorting through the details of the loss can be therapeutic.

If you are not comfortable talking, you may want to express yourself creatively. Writing, drawing, music or other forms of art can help. You don’t need to feel like you have to be a great writer or artist to do so, just work on expressing your feelings through an outlet.

What you can do:

- **Find a creative outlet.** Keep a journal, start a blog, paint or draw, write poetry or a story, sing or play an instrument, build or create something.

- **Contact the organization who gave you this booklet.** They may have a counselor, hold support groups or have other resources.

- **If faith helps you, connect with a spiritual community.** Some people might turn away from their faith or change beliefs while grieving. However, if faith is a refuge for you, seek out a spiritual community for support.

- **Try online support groups.** Reading other people’s grief stories can be comforting.

- **Look for more resources to learn about grief.** There are countless books and websites with different strategies to help you cope.
You may be worried that you will forget details about the person you’ve lost. You can stay connected to their memory and allow your relationship to continue to have a place in your life by creating activities in honor of them.

Moving forward with your life does not mean you will forget. Once you realize that you will never forget your lost loved one, you can truly start to heal. We grieve because we have loved and that connection can never be broken.

What you can do:

- **Keep the person’s belongings** for as long as you need to. Some people keep them for a long time and some donate everything right away. Do what feels right to you. Consider keeping a small memento to carry with you.

- **Gather with others on special days** to share memories. Cook your loved one’s favorite meals or plan an activity in honor of your loved one with those who knew them.

- **Make a scrapbook** or photo album of your loved one.

- **Create a memorial** website or blog.

- **Light candles** in the person’s favorite scent.

- **Plant** your loved one’s favorite flowers.

- **Pick a symbol** that represents your loved one, like a heart or a butterfly and think of them whenever you see one.
Complicated Grief

Grief is such a difficult journey that some people think they are suffering from depression; but feelings of grief will ease over time for many and they will be able to accept their loss and move forward.

It is important to know the difference between normal grief and clinical depression because the therapies used to treat depression typically will not heal grief. Grief is a normal reaction to loss, whereas depression is caused by a chemical imbalance.

However, for those stuck in their grief, it does not get easier over time. Feelings of emptiness and despair can stay intense for a very long time. This is known as prolonged grief disorder (PGD), or complicated grief. Some experts compare this to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is an intense emotional reaction to trauma.

Regular grief is like an emotional rollercoaster with intense ups and downs. PGD does not have any ups at all and will cause people to feel constantly hopeless, worthless, and empty. It may also cause people to seriously think about suicide.

If you have feelings like this but they come and go, you are probably experiencing normal grief, but you should reach out to someone if you are unsure. A professional can tell you if what you’re feeling is normal or if you have PGD.

What you can do:

- Reach out for help NOW if you think you are suffering from PGD. Call your family doctor or contact the grief counselors at Hospice of Health First. Call us today at 321.434.1744, or visit our website at HF.org/hospice.
Grieving Children and Teens

After a loss, children and teens have unique emotional needs that should be paid attention to. Many people assume children are too young to know what’s going on and they don’t believe young children can feel intense grief. Or, some may be too caught up in their own grief to help children or teens.

The lack of understanding can make grief even harder for the kids in your life. Just as you are suffering right now, so are they. It’s essential to try to guide children and teens through this hard time. Plus, helping kids to heal may be healing for you, too.

What you can do:

- **Let children see you grieve.** They need a good example to follow. Show them it’s okay to cry and demonstrate how to work out their grief through play, art, or talking. Be honest when talking about death and try to avoid saying things like “he went to sleep” or “she went away,” which can make kids afraid of sleeping or people leaving.

- **Try not to emotionally burden grieving kids.** Avoid saying things like “you’re the man/woman of the house now.” Do not expect kids to act like adults as they grieve. Children and teens need to know they will still be cared for and protected.

- **Keep in touch with how teens are doing in school.** They may begin to act out as they cope. Ask for help from teachers or guidance counselors and watch for risky behavior, big drops in grades, disinterest in activities or alcohol/drug abuse.

- **Consider contacting a counselor specializing in grieving children or teens.** It may give you peace of mind to work with a professional. There may also be support groups of grief camps for kids in your area. Check with Hospice of Health First’s Bereavement Services or search online for support.
Looking Towards the Future

As you navigate your grief, you may wish you could get back to the way life was before your loss. It may help to realize that life simply isn’t going to be the same as it was before; but find comfort in the fact you can create a new normal.

One of the best ways you can honor your loved one’s memory is by giving yourself permission to be happy again. Allow yourself to enjoy life, have meaningful relationships and find moments of peace and happiness – now and in the future.

The death of your loved one may have changed your life, but do not let it destroy you. Trust that your grief will get easier with time and know that eventually you will be able to look toward the future with hope.

What you can do:

■ Take life one moment, one step at a time.

■ When you are ready, adjust your focus to the future. Start making plans and setting new goals.

■ Always try to be gentle with yourself.
To learn more about how and when Hospice of Health First can help you or a loved one, call 321.434.1744 or visit our website at HF.org/hospice