

# good grief

what you can do and say to support someone  
through the shittiest times in their life



em meurer

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what you can do and say to support someone  
through the shittiest times in their life.

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Here's the thing about grief: it really sucks. Broadly speaking, no one really knows how to deal with it. I'm not an expert - nobody is. I'm here to tell you that you can't fix it, but you can support it.

This book is here to tell you what to do and what to say when you have no idea what to do or say. Maybe you'll be a better human because of it.

Don't be afraid to put what you learn into practice and make the absurd amount of research that went into this book worth it. It's the very least you can do for you people who are having a rough time in life, and for me because I had to read a lot of fairly boring books with bad covers. Try your best because trying is the most that you can do: listen, show up, and don't bullshit.

# grief

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part 1

# the part about grief

Everyone will experience grief at some point in their lives. You will always need to know how to tend to it.

The big truth is that nothing will ever stay the same. Loss is inevitable. It's possible to prepare yourself for your own losses by bearing witness and acknowledging that no person is without loss. It happens all the time, and you probably know someone who is grieving a loss right now.

**so what is grief?**

Most people assume that grief is when a person is sad after someone they love dies, but grief is a lot more than that. Grief is the emotional response to a loss of any kind. While many of the examples and solutions in this book on grief centers around grief following a death, which is most often what we think of when we consider grief, there is no single reason to feel grief. It can happen because of the loss of a pet, a divorce or breakup, the loss of a job or opportunity, graduating, or having to move: grief doesn't just happen after a death.

If you haven't experienced grief, it can be hard to imagine going through it. This is a part of the massive catch-22 of supporting grief: the only people who know how to best support and understand grief are the people who are grieving. They might not have the mental energy to teach someone about what they're going through or how to make their lives easier, so they often just don't. This grief education is often the last thing a person wants to spend their energy on.

Part of the reason why this sucks as much as it does is because most of what we know in western culture about comforting the grieving is incorrect or unhelpful. Many of the things that we do and say to help someone can end up hurting the person in ways that we might not notice or realize. Learning basics about what grief is and what it is not can be helpful when trying to support someone you love who's going through it. By learning how to better support someone you love through hard times, it can become easier to support them daily and improve your listening and thoughtful response skills.

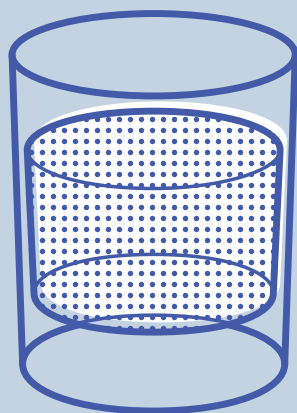
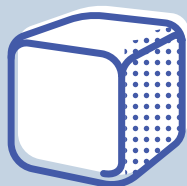


# what does grief feel like?

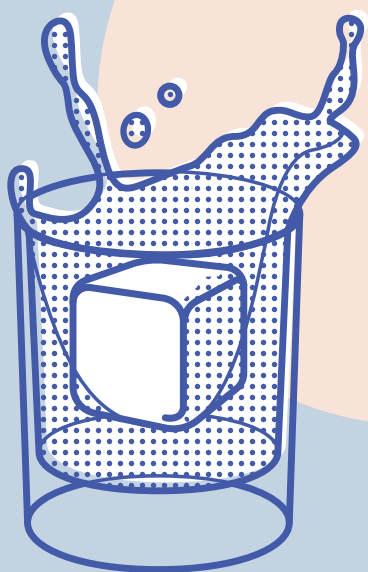
It's really tough to describe an emotion that you've never felt, but it's important to know what grief feels like in order to tend to it. If you've never experienced strong grief, it can be hard to even know where to start learning about it. Dr. Susan Delaney, a clinical psychologist for the Irish Hospice Foundation, suggests using metaphors to talk about how grief affects someone.

Think of your emotions as a glass filled with water. If you drop an ice cube into the glass, it will displace the water and cause the drink to splash out of the cup. The ice in your glass can't be removed once it's

**grief**



**your emotions**



in there, but it can be filled around. Eventually, it might melt a little and take up less space, but it's still there.

At first, grief displaces so much of people's daily routines, emotions, and relationships. Like the ice in the glass, loss isn't something that can be removed from someone's life or made better, but someone who experiences loss will eventually grow around it and adjust to the new temperature that their life is. Their loss may still clink into their emotions and make itself known, but as time goes on, this might happen less. Grief eventually becomes integrated into everyday life to the point that it becomes part of the whole, rather than constantly displacing other things in life.

Because grief is an individual experience, there isn't just one way to feel it. Someone might feel devastated, angry, or even relieved; sometimes these emotions can all be happening at once or on their own.

**Although being sad about a loss is what we expect, it's okay to feel more than that. You aren't going crazy, something crazy just happened. Whatever you or someone else feels is valid.**

Grief demands to be felt. Thanatologist Cole Imperi describes it as being like a shitty roommate: they might be the worst, but you have to learn to live together. Ignoring them might cause them to make your life hell, but getting to know them and making a space for them in your life might make living together easier.

it can be helpful to remember that the relationship hasn't ended, the nature of it has changed.

### **why does grief happen?**

What we think of as the painful part of loss really comes out of the relationship that exists between the person and what or who they lost. Many people who have experienced grief state that it was the price that they pay for the love they felt for the person. Sometimes it can be helpful to remember that the relationship hasn't ended, the nature of it has changed. Although the person that they had the relationship with is gone, the person who is left behind still has a relationship with the person that they lost.

## there's no schedule when it comes to grief.

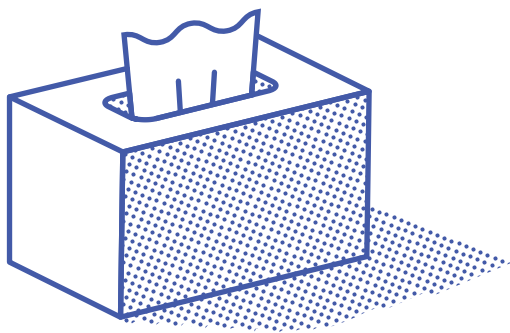
Don't assume that someone's grief will end at a specific time. The end of a funeral isn't the end of grief for a family. People can actively grieve for years, and that is okay. It's healthy to still feel the pain of a loss after a long period of time. Be patient with those grieving, and tell them to be patient with their own emotions.

## when grief gets complicated

Some people may not feel comfortable with talking about what it is that they're grieving over, but it doesn't mean that their grief is unimportant. These losses may not be visible and include situations like a miscarriage, having to get an abortion, a breakup of a closeted queer couple, diagnosis with an STD, losing custody of a child, or learning about an affair. This is called *disenfranchised grief*: when someone is grieving over something that is deemed inappropriate or taboo in their culture where they wouldn't be able to talk about it with someone. People experiencing this type of grief need just as much support as people who experience visible losses, but don't pressure these people to talk about it if they aren't comfortable.

The majority of people don't actually need therapy specifically for grief, so there often isn't a need to worry. However, while many people tend to their emotions and take the time that they need to grieve, there are some instances where people repress their feelings, and their grief devolves into serious mental health issues that need professional attention. If you believe that someone you care about is experiencing what is known as *complicated grief*, there are resources later in this book to help you.

You can't help someone to get over their grief or get rid of it, but you can be there to support their grief and hold their hand along the way. All of the qualities that you loved in your friend are still there, even when they're grieving, and remembering who they are as a person can help you figure out what you can do to help them.



# why is grief hard to understand

**Our way of feeling grief hasn't changed,  
but our ways of coping, understanding,  
and supporting have.**

The American way of thinking about end of life sucks, but by taking a first step to changing the way we culturally support those in grief, we can help to shift the way that we think about death, palliative care and mental health away from the taboo that they hold in society. Many Americans don't even experience a huge loss until they're middle aged, and therefore, have little to no experience with how to cope and take care of themselves in grief.

We can never totally be rid of having a fear of death, but we can familiarize ourselves with death and grow to live alongside it. Death doesn't have to loom over us, but we need to be able to talk about it, laugh at it, and be engaged with it.

Having an understanding of how to support people, specifically with an understanding of death, can be crucial to supporting a friend who may not want to

seek professional help for their anxiety. Recognizing and becoming more comfortable with the idea of the inevitability of death and loss and knowing that support is there, should you need it, can help to ease your own anxieties.

**Having anxiety about dying or experiencing a loss is extremely common,** and many professionals consider a fear of death to be at the root of many anxieties. Studies done as early as the 1960s have shown that as our average life span increases, so does the rate of people who seek help for anxiety about death. Another not-so-fun fact is that death anxiety is more common in higher income, white males than in any other demographic.

We can use this statistic to make *a lot* of assumptions about how gender and privilege in America play a role in our understanding of our mortality. The one that is really key is that groups that, on average, frown upon talking about mental health and being vulnerable, suffer the most from mental health issues that will likely affect them on a daily basis.



# the five stages of grief

If you ask most Americans what they know about grief, the majority of them will bring up the five stages of grief (but they probably won't actually be able to list all five of them or what they mean). What we know as the five stages of grief, also known as the Kübler-Ross model, were written by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross after observations of the emotional states of terminally ill patients after diagnosis.

# elizabeth kubler-ross



**the woman,  
the myth,  
the legend:**

Introduced in her 1969<sup>1</sup> book, *On Death and Dying*, the Kübler-Ross model was originally written as a theory based on her observations that reflected on how people cope with dying. As a culture, we totally misinterpreted, and continue to misunderstand, what grief is. We often hold the bereaved to standards in their grieving that are often impossible, which is actually pretty harmful. Many psychologists who don't specialize in grief therapy will even impose this theory on their patients, who may be attending therapy due to their need for accurate support.

As with many non-fiction books, people never read the whole thing (I did, and it was honestly kind of boring). Kübler-Ross even wrote that her theory was misunderstood because it resembled a linear progression through emotions. Later editions of *On Death and Dying* bring up the idea that the five stages of grief were never intended to be used as a schedule for grieving.

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<sup>1</sup> nice

Unfortunately, because of the way that most people interpret the stages of grief theory, many people don't understand the emotions that they're experiencing at the time. This is what leads people down the rabbit hole of thinking they're crazy because they aren't following the stages in order or they're diverting away from the few specific emotions that the stages list out. Part of the responsibility of caring for a person who is drowning in their grief is to reassure people that relief, joy, anger, and other emotions are okay to feel following the loss of a loved one. No two people grieve in the same way: sometimes people in shock will not show their emotions outwardly, which doesn't mean they aren't grieving. Support people, even if they're not showing any emotions that we commonly understand as grief.

**Knowing about the five stages of grief can be helpful in understanding that grief encompasses a *variety* of emotional and mental states, but it's important to remember that it's simply a broad model for categorizing reactions.**

## denial

Shock and disbelief at learning about something disturbing. Denying what is happening to them and focusing on the past.

## anger

Looking for someone to blame for their situation. Blaming themselves for what is happening or blaming an outside person or force.

## bargaining

Believing that if they do something good in their lives, it will prevent other bad things from happening. Trying to postpone the inevitable or find a solution where the outcome is somehow less bad. This may reflect the magical thinking that is often associated with obsessive compulsive disorder.

## depression

This is a stage of low-energy and sadness. They may have trouble mentally processing things and their thought process may be impaired in some ways. It can be temporary or chronic.

## acceptance

Being aware that they can't change the situation. Recognizing that the situation is out of their hands and they have to deal with it as it is.

## **social media and grief**

Because of the rise of social media, we have seen an uptick in people are experiencing more intense grief and denial for longer periods of time than they have before. Facebook has recently evaluated what they should do as a result of dead people's profiles beginning to outnumber the living users on their website and how to memorialize them. Some people argue that being able to visit the digital remains of their loved one provides them with a better connection than if they went to visit their physical remains. However, the internet wasn't made with the concept of death in mind, and the way that some people imagine their loved ones still being alive through interactions with their online presence can make the loss even harder.

Coming to terms with grief can be super hard for everyone who goes through it. Unfortunately, the closure that we crave and expect after the funeral ends may never happen. In western culture, we perpetuate a myth that we will eventually accept our sadness and move on with our lives, but this happy ending only rarely comes to people following a significant loss. There will probably never be a time when someone is completely over their loss, and it's okay to acknowledge and feel pain, even a long time afterward. Trying to get someone to a place where it's as if the loss never happened can be hurtful, because it seeks to erase the relationship they had with who or what they lost, and harmful, because it doesn't allow them to process the trauma that they are going through.

# Rituals

In a very broad sense, people have always sought to explain the dichotomy of life and death and give a purpose to living what can be deemed as a good life.

Studies have shown that incorporating a ritual can help people cope with change. This is why many cultures, whether they are based in a religious practice or secular, use important ceremonies to acknowledge and commemorate big life changes. Marriage, childbirth, and funerals are just a few examples. They help us to create a shared understanding of the situation and bring a sense of familiarity to a new and unknown situation.

Especially in the case of funerals, practicing a ritual can give those grieving a feeling of control over something. Funerals, in any culture and practice, allow both the family and the deceased person to have a sense of dignity in the emotionally raw time that is grief. Understanding death rituals in cultures other than your own can help you to claim meaning from your own rituals. Religion is often the basis of many of these rituals, but may also be the root of our own bias for whether or not someone is grieving “correctly.”

**The merits of a ritual should be based on the emotions that it either creates or helps someone to understand, not on how different it is from what we know.**

# religious funerals

**Many religious practices set aside time for mourning following a death and encourage believers to turn to their religion for comfort. Whether or not you rely on a religion in times of need, the most important element of making a ritual meaningful and comforting is to just show up.**

In Judaism, the process of grieving is formal and ritualized. Jewish law views comforting the mourner and honoring the dead as two of the most important commandments. People sit *shiva*, where they set aside seven days following the burial for prayers to allow the family to grieve. In this time, the family stays in the home and mourns for three days, and then allows guests to mourn with them for the final four days. When guests come, they bring food and allow the grieving family members to speak first. The family continues to formally mourn and say prayers for a month, and again on the anniversary of the loss a year later. Jewish people will often pray and perform acts of charity, such as community service and donating money, to commemorate the life of their loved one.

In Islam, life is viewed as a direct relationship with God that is built through practicing the Five Pillars of Islam. They believe death is the culmination of this relationship, where a person becomes united with God. As an Abrahamic faith, Muslims follow many of the same burial customs that Judaism practice. Families will share sweet foods with the community 3, 7, and 40 days after the funeral and burial, to symbolize the sweet thoughts and prayers that they are offering to their dead loved one. On the 40th day, the family will recite the story of the birth of the Prophet and believe that the spirit of the loved one will return to listen with them. A year following the death, Muslims will return to the grave and commemorate, similarly to the way that Jews celebrate the anniversary and life of the loved one.

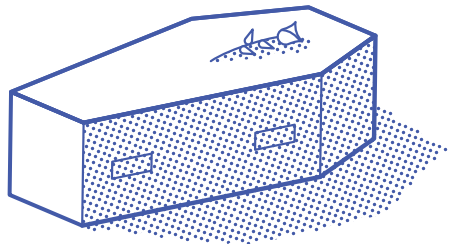
Christianity also has a basis in Judaism, but the ritualization of how and when the funeral takes place differs much more significantly than in Islam. The funeral ritual usually contains two events: the wake, or a formal viewing of the body and time to express condolences to the family, and the religious funeral service. Many Catholic families will often attend a Mass, or religious service, on the anniversary of the person's death. In Eastern Orthodox communities, similarly to Muslim communities, families attend services 3, 8, and 40 days following the funeral.



Buddhists will celebrate religious services for three days following a person's death, as well as at certain intervals to celebrate memorial services, to allow their loved one's soul to peacefully depart.

Hindus traditionally surround themselves with their loved ones at the end of their lives. They believe that, while a person's body dies, their soul lives on, so they won't participate in any religious ceremonies until 13 days after the death, once they believe that the loved one's soul has left their body.

While not everyone turns to or actively participates in a religion, setting aside the time to grieve and take comfort in a constant in their lives can be helpful in understanding and coming to terms with their grief.



While some argue that these rituals cover up just how messy loss is for the living and how natural death is as a part of our life cycles, it's important to keep in mind that all funerals are really for the comfort of the living. We can reform the way that we practice rituals to confront our grief, but we shouldn't judge others for the way that they memorialize their losses.

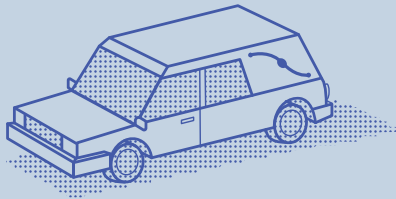
**The importance of taking time to learn about and consider how religions and cultures other than our own value both the spiritual and secular rituals of death really comes down to realizing what works in terms of providing comfort to people and learning about valuing the time that grief takes either away from us or we should take to sit with our grief.**

# the american funeral

Within Western culture,  
funerals are really intended to  
be for the living. Americans  
come into contact with death  
a lot less than we used to.

As American culture has  
assimilated into a more uniform  
lifestyle, so has our outlook on  
death and funeral practices.

But does it matter if we aren't  
exposed to death regularly?  
What does having a single style  
of funeral ritual for an entire  
society mean?



When a person died, back in the olden days, the family would take time to clean and dress the body, sit with it in their home, and let the community gather to memorialize the person. As the death toll of the Civil War grew, families sought out ways to be reunited with their loved ones before they were buried, and embalming a body after death began to grow in popularity. With this trend came the professionalization of death care, and a task that was originally delegated to families, specifically women in those families, was taken away. Our funeral traditions changed dramatically as the US became more industrial, but they haven't been able to keep up much when compared to the rest of our culture. Since then, funerals have stayed relatively the same: now we have funerals outside of the home, bodies are chemically embalmed, and the family has little involvement with the planning of the funeral itself.

Within western secular (non-religious) society, funerals often promote the idea of exceptionalism. The body of the deceased person is beautified as much as possible, and the person is remembered only for the good things they did. Some people argue that this beautification of death shows the extent of the denial of death that we feel, while others find comfort in being able to see their loved one at peace. We can interpret this ritual in the same way that we think about how judgmental we are of other cultures' death rituals: we shouldn't shame people if they find comfort in something, just because we are uncomfortable.

But why is it important to know that the concept of the funeral changed so rapidly into what we know today? The way we understand and see grief is totally different from what it used to be. In America, one of the biggest complaints that funeral professionals get is that the family doesn't get enough time to sit in their grief and say goodbye before the funeral is over. Funerals are no longer community affairs. The biggest challenge that funeral directors face? Getting butts in the seats. And with the increase in the popularity of direct cremations, a more economical solution to funerals, which can cost thousands of dollars, families are showing up even less to be present at funerals than ever before.

However, for many people, the professionalization of death care is a good thing. Only having to make one stop for arranging a funeral can ease a heavy burden on people who are going through a very difficult time. Being able to spend time with loved ones at the funeral, without feeling the pressure of having to organize the event, allows people more time to process the realness of the loss and fills a psychological need for comfort from other people. Studies have shown that while people in older generations have knowledge on how natural death is, often they find it hard to engage with funeral planning. Younger generations, who may not be well versed in their understanding of mortality, feel less shame about not knowing what to do in the funeral planning process and are more open to asking for help.

## **the aesthetics of grief**

This major cultural shift can also be physically seen through some aesthetics of grief. Since the beginning of written history, people have been changing their style to reflect to others that they were in mourning. The ancient Egyptians would shave their eyebrows following a death. In Victorian England, mourning fashion took off as women wore black dresses and men donned black armbands as an outward symbols of mourning. People still wear black (or the traditional mourning color in their country) to funerals, and members of more traditional religious communities will wear these colors for extended periods of time.

Even now, some people wear buttons with messaging on them to ask people to treat them more gently because they're in an emotionally tough spot. Fashion plays a role in grief because it's an outward way to show people that someone doesn't want to discuss their emotions in public without having to take the time to explain it.

# secular rituals

## **mexico**

When we think about which cultures celebrate death, most Americans will recognize Dia de los Muertos, the Mexican festival for remembering the dead. What people may not realize is that, although both American and Mexican funeral customs are based on Christian practices, in Mexico this is a time where families both privately and publicly grieve, engage with their communities, and memorialize the dead outside of the single funeral service. The practice began in rural Mexico, where many indigenous groups integrated their beliefs with Christian beliefs, and has spread further into urban areas throughout Mexico. During Dia de los Muertos, people not only grieve their loved ones, but represent and pay homage to the struggles of disenfranchised members of society: migrants, sex workers, LGBTQ people, and the indigenous people who started the practice of sharing their grief with their community.

Part of the reason that Dia de los Muertos is so important in Mexican culture is because public grieving *works*. The community as a whole takes time to visit families who have lost a loved one in the past year and pay their respects. Families spend time with each other and remember their dead by visiting the cemetery and leaving offerings and candles in their memory.

There seems to be a trend in who celebrates death versus who fears death most that correlates with economic and racial status. As mentioned earlier, the wealthier and whiter you are, the more likely you are to fear death. People who face struggles about their own welfare and rights tend to embrace death. This could explain the celebrations that death receives in countries like Mexico, Trinidad and Tobago, and Taiwan, where they have so often been the victims of colonization. Being familiar with death and living alongside it is a part of their national identity. Death is the great equalizer, and people who fear it often have more to lose when they think about dying than people who do not.





## **japan**

As a study of contrasts, in Japan, where a similar professionalization of death has taken place, the cultural fear of death has decreased dramatically in correlation to the accessibility of funeral professionals by the public. The opposite can be seen in America in the same 100 year time span. The rapid changes in healthcare over the past hundred years have improved our chances of living well into old age, so that most of our understanding of death comes in the form of our grandparents or great-grandparents passing away. The average life expectancy in both countries is high—the World Health Organization recognizes Japan's to be the highest, while the US's is 31 on the same list. Economically, both countries have high GDPs.

So why are we seeing the cultural anxiety of death being significantly less in Japan than in the United States? We know that privilege and fear of death often go hand-in-hand. It's likely because Japan has innovated on their funeral practices so much. Many of the groups that are striving for change in the Japanese funeral industry heavily involve Buddhist monks, who value maintaining the reverence toward the dead but are conscious of the limitations that are imposed by having such a dense population. The Japanese value innovation in all fields, while many Americans tend to stick with what they know and are comfortable with.

The United States hasn't seen significant innovation on funeral practices since the Civil War, and what funerals were before this time period are largely forgotten. The Japanese value the time and ritual of death, much more than Americans do. Funeral homes offer places for families to stay, often in cities where finding accommodations is hard, providing them with significant time to spend with family and the body of their loved one. They provide options for rituals that the family can participate in and directly confront the finality of their loss. All of these things allow the family to grieve and provide them with meaningful tasks and rituals to give a purpose to their grief.

### **building a community of support**

The Japanese value the community of loved ones that they get to surround themselves with whom they can be supported in their grief. By supporting your own loved ones, you play a part in creating these communities of grief support. Showing up is the key factor in whether or not a person feels okay in their grief. The example of the Japanese funeral system that so closely parallels our own but has a totally different perception is important because if we strive to change our perception of funerals, we must start with the people who show up to them.

part 2

# the part about you

**Grief support is hard if you're doing it for the first time (or even the millionth time).**

It's one thing to know and understand the cultural taboos and weirdness about being around people who are grieving, but it's another thing to experience the awkwardness of it. It's natural to not want to engage with someone who makes you feel awkward and unsure, and because of the interpretations of death that are ingrained in western culture, being around someone who is outwardly sad is really tough. It's natural to want to make someone's sadness better or go away; however, grief isn't something that can be cheered up.

Here's the thing: you need to show up and make an effort to show that you care for someone. You can't change the pain that someone you love is in, pain demands to be felt, but you can change your response to it. You can't problem solve with pain, but you can tend to it and take care of someone while they're experiencing it.

You are a witness to someone's grief when you try to support them. You are not a problem solver. It is not your job to be their personal therapist, you're just a caring person who is there to be their friend. You are there to reassure them where they are. Grief support is really just companionship inside pain: you're someone's friend, even in hard times. And while grief is different for everyone experiencing pain and depends on the person and their loss, knowing who your friend is and the qualities about them that you love can help you to address their pain in meaningful ways.

**normalize your  
awkwardness, step  
up, bear witness,  
listen, respond,  
and just be there.**

Unless they specifically ask you to let them be for a while, you're not intruding when you try to talk to a sad friend. You are being a true and good friend for sticking with them when others may be avoiding confronting their grief.

It's okay to be imperfect, there is no correct or perfect way to handle grief. No one is a natural at anything, and being able to face grief is no different. You will get better at recognizing pain and how to support it, as well as more comfortable with it, the more exposed you are to it. Grief is hard on everyone.

Err on the side of showing up for your friend. You can always lead by stating that you don't know what to say. Claim your discomfort. You're allowed to not know what to do. You're allowed to ask them questions. Embrace silence, you don't need to fill it. Sometimes all someone needs is a friend to be with them.

## self care

As a friend to someone grieving, you become their companion through their entire grieving process, and this can be emotionally exhausting. Remembering the airplane safety mantra of putting on your oxygen mask before someone else's can be helpful at any point when you feel like you need to be there for someone but are neglecting yourself. If you're also grieving or find it all too much to bear, you are allowed to take a break and care for yourself. Self care is always important because you can't help others if you're not helping yourself. You don't have to devote your entire life to support someone. Do as much as you can, but know when it's time to take care of your own emotional and mental health.

**Let me reiterate: you are not a problem solver, a judge, a therapist, or a constant companion. You can support someone within your own bounds, recognize when you're pushing yourself too much, and step back when you need to.**

# step one: showing up

Being there for someone is important. One of the many catchphrases that get blurted out to a grieving person is along the lines of “I’m so sorry, I’m here for you,” but it’s an empty promise. We can say that we’ll be there for someone, but are we actually physically there? Unfortunately, showing up is often the thing that we forget to do to help someone in their grief.

The key component in the rituals explored in this book is the fact that the community shows up and engages with the pain of loss. You are a part of your friends and loved ones’ community, and being there with them *and* for them is a major part in what they need in their grief.

Physically being there for someone is as easy as sitting with someone in their pain and not forcing them to talk. It can be watching TV with them when they just need something to distract them. If you physically can’t be there with them, doing things like calling them regularly and giving them the option to answer or not, depending on how they feel, can create a reliable presence in their lives. Showing up is easy, even when what you may be confronting when you get there is hard to deal with.

## **so what does showing up mean?**

Showing up for someone is listening. You're allowed to tell someone that you will be there to listen if they want to talk. Do not interrupt them, allowing them to get all of their feelings out of their heads and into the open. Let them know that they can tell the truth, as rough as it might be, to you without having to worry about judgment or needing to apologize.

**You're there to validate and support them, so don't apologize for you feeling awkward about it. Thank them for being willing to share their emotions with you.**

## **more easy ways to support grief**

- send them a text saying that you're thinking of them
- venmo them so they can buy a coffee
- pick up a treat for them
- tell them (to their actual face) that you're sad for them
- run an errand for them
- go visit them and sit with them for a little while
- watch a movie with them
- water their plants for them



## **taking action**

Lots of energy goes into grieving, and sometimes that can result in what is, no joke, professionally known as “grief brain.” People in mourning or experiencing a depressive episode might forget about routine tasks, like going to buy toilet paper or taking a shower. The age-old saying “let me know if there’s anything I can do to help” doesn’t mean anything. We often won’t follow through to check in, or they won’t ask for help when they need it, even if you see them struggling to do daily tasks. Sometimes asking people what they need when they are already overwhelmed can overwhelm them even more.

Don’t worry about asking, just do. Many people trying to help will bring food, but no one will bring toilet paper or paper plates. Run their errands, walk their dogs, help them clean their house. Everyday necessities and things that will ease the workload for everyday tasks can be among the most thoughtful and helpful gifts someone in mourning can receive.

Helping out doesn’t even mean going out of your way. If you’re already going to the grocery, you can pick up everyday essentials for them. You don’t have to pressure yourself to anticipate someone’s needs, sometimes the smallest and un-asked for favors are what mean the most to someone.

# what to say

We might think that commenting on someone's Instagram post about losing their grandma is enough, but it really isn't. Not that commenting something genuinely nice isn't a good thing to do, but when it comes to what you can say to someone who is grieving, I'm talking about what you should say to their actual face, with words coming from your actual mouth.

In the United States, we are becoming more and more familiar with how phrases like "thoughts and prayers" are bullshit when it comes to confronting tragedy and making reparations. A grandparent may "kick the bucket," or a pet may "cross the rainbow bridge" or "go live on a farm upstate." Words like these are what journalist Rose George refers to as "the linguistic scaffolding of shame and secrecy." In her book, *Nine Pints*, George talks about all of the ways that we can talk about private or taboo topics with euphemisms that skirt around what is really happening. There are a lot of things that we can say in place of something that we think is unpleasant, harsh, or inappropriate because we believe that we need a more polite way of addressing it outright. This might explain why the Wikipedia list of expressions for death contains 135 different entries because we are afraid of being rude or inconsiderate. However, this just digs us deeper into denying our own feelings of grief and fear of death.

# the importance about talking about grief

Everyone benefits from talking openly about topics that are deemed taboo. This includes death. By starting conversations that address them, you can help to create a meaningful dialog that allows someone's pain to be seen. Representation of the pain of grief, especially about taboo topics, whether in film, art, or in conversation, is incredibly important in letting people who are grieving know that their pain is important and okay to be felt. By speaking about the cause of the pain or loss, people can confront their grief, speak its name, and take away the feeling of needing to compromise what they feel for the social comfort of others.

Dr. Glenys Caswell, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Nottingham, suggests that **“using familiar words and actions in an unfamiliar situation can help us find our way through it.”** As someone who is supporting a grieving person, you play a role in being a guiding force for someone through grief, and allowing a person to use you to navigate their grief through conversation is an invaluable gift that you can give them.

**not knowing what to say is fine, it's saying something at all that's important.** An unfortunate but common occurrence is that grieving people assume the worst when they're at their lowest: that you are abandoning or ignoring them when they don't hear from you, that what you're saying isn't genuine if it's a super common statement, or that they don't deserve your love. It's easier for someone to forgive you for making an awkward comment than it is to forgive you for ghosting them.

### **think before you speak**

Think twice before you speak, especially when you're talking to someone who may over analyze everything you say to them because they're grieving. It may feel right to use one of the many oft-repeated adages of reassurance, but often they're empty statements and not helpful to the person you're saying them to.

When trying to express something meaningful, a challenging but important exercise is to think about what you're saying is to consider a second half to your statements or how they could be misinterpreted. People who are not in a great mental place tend to think of how a sentence may not be true or genuine, or having an unspoken "because" that diminishes what you mean to say.

This may help you to be more heartfelt and caring in knowing what to say to someone. Don't let a fear of someone taking what you say the wrong way prevent you from speaking up. Sometimes knowing what not to say can be more helpful than knowing what to say.

### **changing your language**

Talking about grief is really hard to do for everyone involved. Instead of apologizing for seeming distant (if you don't seem upset by it) or emotional (especially if you're a sympathetic crier, I'm very guilty of this) when someone shares how they feel with you, responding with "thank you for sharing what you're going through with me, it really means a lot that you trust me to listen and care about you."

Change the way you try to help someone feel better from overly-positive statements of "it'll get better!" and "just think positive thoughts!" into statements that validate the feelings that someone has. You can give people hope in the future by validating and asking questions, rather than enforcing a false sense of positivity.

# do this, not that

There's no exact game plan to support grief. Sometimes it's easier to know what to avoid doing and using what remains as a starting point. Remember, there are no wrongs when it comes to taking care of grief and any effort to help someone is appreciated.

# don't compare griefs

This sounds like “I was sadder than you were when my grandma died,” or “it took me so much less time to stop being upset about my loss.”

Your experience with grief is different than theirs, and it's selfish to try to one-up them. While you may be trying to make them feel better about how they're reacting to their loss in comparison to your's, you can't understand how they feel, so don't try to make a connection over it.

don't think that  
someone's grief  
isn't special

Yes, everyone will experience grief, but it doesn't make one person's grief unimportant. Everyone's grief is unique.

Say "I understand our losses are different, but I recognize your's," instead of "you aren't alone."



They don't need to be told how strong or pretty they are, nor do they need a confidence boost. Remembering the qualities that you admire about that person can guide you through what to say and do to help them in a more personal way.

**don't  
compliment them**

# don't minimize their grief

There is no such thing as grief being disproportionate to the scale of the loss: a person may feel intense grief over the loss of a job, while someone who just lost a parent might not show as much grief outwardly as you may expect. Don't judge them for it.

Not all griefs are equal in their magnitude, but this does not make one person's less important.

**don't  
try to  
cheer  
them up**

Grief can't be cheered up or be given a positive spin.

Support them in the emotions they're experiencing at that moment, and ask them how they feel. Affirm the feelings they have. You are allowed to tell someone "this sucks."

# don't talk about what the person they lost would have wanted

This might make the person feel blame for the loss, and guilty about their grief. Saying that their loved one wouldn't want them to cry over the loss invalidates the sadness they feel and might make them feel ashamed about physically and publicly expressing their emotions.

# Don't say that their loved one is in a better place

It can be more hurtful to the bereaved because it may cause them to think that the place they were together was not the best place for them. Sometimes, this can be what a person, specifically someone who is deeply religious, wants to hear, but for the majority of people, this falls in with common grief phrases that are insincere and not helpful. This might also backfire for someone who is deeply religious and believes that their loved one did something that they could go to hell for and could cause them even more pain over the loss.

# don't talk about the future

The person doesn't always want to know that things will get better if the present is so horrible for them. They might not be able to imagine being happy or going back to normal after the trauma of grief.

Instead, talk to them about their present feelings and support them at that moment. It can be especially hard to avoid trying to be encouraging if they seem to dwell in the past. Asking them about their favorite memories with their loved one might help bridge the gap between the past, the future, and the reality they may be stuck in.

**don't  
force  
someone  
to repress  
their  
feelings**

Don't make someone stop crying or venting about how upset they are because it makes you uncomfortable. This is just mean. Listen to what people feel they need to express and let them know it's okay to cry if they need to. Validate and normalize grief.

# funerals

I get it, funerals are weird. They can be tough to attend from an emotional standpoint, but your presence can mean a lot to the people whose loved one has died. A lot of people are terrified of going to them for a variety of reasons like seeing a dead body or having to talk to a politically incorrect uncle that you never get along with.

Funerals need a bit of a rebrand in general, but you can help improve your own experience by changing the way that you think about them. Just like many get-togethers, they're meant to be times spent with loved ones. They can create meaning from the event that's taking place. We need to start envisioning funerals (and what goes on both before and after them) as interactive events. They require just as much engagement as any other event. After all, funerals are social events.



## **etiquette**

It's important to use good manners, no matter how formal you expect it to be. Speaking softly, putting your phone on silent out of respect, and being polite are to be expected. Funerals are often formal ceremonies that incorporate a religious service or solemn eulogy with some emotional or spiritual meaning to the family. If the funeral is expected to begin at a certain time, arriving early is advised. If you have to leave early, heading out quietly without disturbing anyone is key.

Dress nicely, unless you know in advance that the dress code isn't necessarily formal. Traditionally, funeral attendees wear black. If the family follows a religious tradition that dictates dress, wearing a head covering or modest clothing may also be an expected part of the dress code.

When talking to people, make sure to introduce yourself, even if you've met someone's relatives before. Saying who you are and your relationship to the deceased or your grieving friend can be helpful to the family and make your presence more meaningful. If a guestbook is available, signing your name and relationship can be impactful to the family, who may have trouble remembering who came to support them because of their grief.

If a casket is displayed, but you don't feel comfortable viewing it, you don't have to. It's okay to feel anxious around a dead body. You are there to support the people who are alive and in mourning and are allowed to stand a comfortable distance away from it.

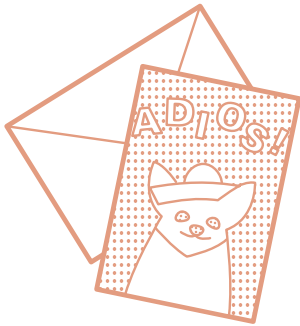
## **living funerals and celebrations of life**

Mitch Albom's 1997 book, *Tuesdays With Morrie*, introduced many Americans to the concept of a living funeral, which is still growing in popularity throughout the US. These are family gatherings done while the person is still alive and often have a happier and celebratory mood, rather than the sadness of a traditional funeral.

They are often held when a person fears that their death is approaching, so they can be with all of the people that they care about. It's a time for the family to celebrate a person's life, forgive each other, and share memories. It allows both the dying person and their loved ones to accept the finality of the death and spend time together one last time, and appreciate the living in a way that they can understand while they are still with their loved ones. As baby boomers are beginning to consider their funeral plans, living funerals are becoming more popular as a cost-effective celebration of life. They are a way for the dying to tell the family that they don't expect an expensive funeral and many people see them as a way of unburdening the family from their responsibilities that come with the grieving and planning following a death.

While there is no single way that a living funeral takes place, being invited to one is significant. You are important to the person or their family, and you should attend if you can. Do what you are most comfortable with there, but speaking to the family and the dying is expected because it is a chance for them to be together and say goodbye.

# sympathy cards



Sympathy cards are a great way to reach out to someone you might not be able to comfort in person. Use the card as a way to reach out to them. Remember: a sympathy card doesn't fix anything, but it's a good way to tell someone that you're there to support them, even if you don't live close enough to them to be fully present with your support. An alternative to writing something is calling, giving a message of support from a distance.



Many people hold onto sympathy cards long after their loss as a way to remember all of the support they received. Sometimes having a physical reminder of how many people care for them can help people feel less alone in their grief. They have a tangible reminder of all of the support that they received, long after the funeral is over.



### **picking a card**

The selection at most card stores is bad, and they either have way too many or way too few options to choose from. Don't feel pressured to buy one of these traditional cards. Sometimes getting a nice card with a blank inside can be the best option.

Choose one that fits the personality of your friend. If they're not a religious person, avoid choosing a religious one. If you know that they have a great sense of humor, you're allowed to get them a funny card that could make them smile. If you don't know the person you're sending it to well, try sticking to a more generic card. There's an option out there for everyone.

### **how to write a sympathy card**

A meaningful sympathy card is one that you put time into writing. Commit to what you say and put the best intentions into it. Correspondence is really great as a way to reach out, but it's not the be-all-end-all. You aren't off the hook by just sending a card if you really want to be a supportive person for someone who's grieving.

Remember the strategies you learned earlier? Writing a note to someone is an easy way to put them into play without feeling anxiety about having to face the person.

Offer your support for the person and tell them that you're going to listen if they want to talk. Share memories of the person that they lost—having memories of someone written down can be incredibly meaningful to someone down the road. As with writing in a guest book at a funeral, sending a card to someone can be helpful in having both a physical manifestation of your support and a reminder of who was there to support them right after their loss.

### **following up**

There is only so much you can do at the beginning of someone's grief, but what really matters is what you do to help in the long run. You aren't off the hook once the funeral is over: being willing to support and care about someone doesn't have an end date.

### **staying in touch**

Set reminders on major dates and anniversaries and reach out. Putting a note on your calendar a month down the road to reach out and talk to a friend is a simple way to remind yourself to be there for someone, suggests Teresa Dutko, a professor of funeral directing and grief psychology. Grief doesn't stop after the funeral ends. Catching up with someone regularly can be reassuring and shows you care.

She also suggests setting up a regular call time with the person. Knowing that you will call regularly and giving them the option to choose whether or not to answer is a simple and tangible way to reassure someone that you are there to support them. Continue to build on the relationship that you established in the beginning of your support and let them know that you continue to think and care about them, even as time passes.

# getting help

## **how do you know when or if someone needs professional help?**

It's okay to live with grief. It is healthy and normal to take a long time to process and go through the emotions that accompany such a large life change. There is no true schedule for grief, and it can be fresh for a person for years.

While it isn't uncommon for someone to bottle up their emotions or work through things themselves, repressing grief can result in lifelong stress and manifest in unexpected and unpleasant ways, such as hoarding or isolation. Men who are impacted by the societal norms of not showing their feelings are often the silent victims of mental health issues that stem from grief. If you're worried about someone not showing their grief, talk to them about it.



Sometimes grief can turn into a long-term depression where the person may have lower energy and less interest in doing things. If someone you care about is grieving long down the road to a point where it prevents them from living their life normally because they are so preoccupied with the loss, it may be a good idea to ask them how they feel and if they need help.

Psychologists use terms like *prolonged grief* and *complicated grief* to talk about grief that goes past normal bounds. Many people don't need to see a

therapist after a loss, but sometimes grief is traumatic and people diagnosed with prolonged or complicated grief really do need professional help. Knowing if someone's grief is prolonged and becoming unhealthy can be tricky, so it's important to leave the diagnosis to the professionals.

**Remember that you don't have to be your friend's personal therapist, and you are allowed to let them know that. There are plenty of resources, support groups, and specialists out there, and introducing people to these can be the push that they need to address their own mental health.**

# everyday practice

## **okay, so why learn about grief support, even if you don't know anyone who is grieving?**

Everyone will experience a loss at some point in their lives, and it's never a bad idea to be prepared. Many of the methods that we can learn from supporting grief can easily translate into everyday life. We can improve on skills that are crucial to being a good support for someone to make ourselves into better people.

## **taking care of yourself**

Be kind to others' emotions and your own. Respect how other people feel. Remember that people (including you!) are allowed to feel any emotion in response to outside situations. Take time to consider your own thoughts and emotions and be gentle in accepting them. Your emotions are valid. Everyone is deserving of help, even you, and it's okay to ask if you need it.

Don't push yourself too hard to take care of others if that means neglecting taking care of yourself. Supporting another person in an emotional time is draining, and you're allowed to take breaks if it takes a toll on your physical or mental health. Do what you can, but don't push

yourself past your limits. Setting boundaries can help, and remember that you're allowed to say no. Building a community of people to support you is just as important as establishing yourself as a part of someone else's support network.

### **don't bullshit**

Listening skills are crucial to being a supportive friend (or a good coworker, if you're trying to brush up your soft skills on LinkedIn). Don't interrupt people, especially when they're sharing something as close to their heart as grief. Know that you don't always have to respond when people are talking to you. Taking time to think about the way you respond allows you to truly mean what you say. It's okay to admit that you don't know what to say sometimes. Being truthful and genuine is often appreciated over a response that doesn't help.

Repeating adages isn't a normal conversational segue, so why use it to try to make someone feel better? Don't bullshit someone with something that you don't understand or really mean. Say and do things that are genuine.

## **being a better friend**

Remember your friends are still the same people they were before they were grieving, so just be yourself around them. Showing up and being reliable is important in any relationship, and you're probably already doing this for your friends. You don't need to treat someone drastically differently when they're grieving, just be gentle with your words and actions.

Being supportive of your friends' emotions doesn't have to begin or end when they're grieving. You can still be there and practice all of these methods, at any time, for anyone. Think of your relationship with someone who is grieving as an aspect of your friendship with them, it may change the nature of it, but it can also deepen the care and support that you give each other. Being aware of how to be sensitive, supportive, and caring for your friends is key to being a good support, but these traits are also key to being a reliable friend.

**You won't be a pro at grief support at first, but like anything, you will get better at it, the more you practice it. Start now: listen to people and respond thoughtfully. Having healthy relationships mean that being a supportive friend is reciprocated. Encourage other people to learn how to better support grief. We can't change our cultural understanding of grief if we don't start in our community, and that means starting with yourself.**

**You can have expectations for your own grief, but your experience maybe be nothing like you assumed it would be. Grief is unpredictable. Changing the way that we support grief starts with us, and it just takes one person to make a difference.**

**Good luck supporting people that you love.**

# **grief support resources**

**There are so many specific grief support networks out there, but you can use these resources as a starting point. Books on grief fall into all genres, ranging from clinical studies to memoirs, so reading a book on dealing with grief doesn't have to be boring. Here are some broad resources on dealing with and understanding grief, but there are many more out there.**

**Learning more about grief and death provides us with more of an opportunity to change the way that we think about both of them.**

# online

## **Modern Loss** [modernloss.com](http://modernloss.com)

Modern Loss hosts personal essays and stories by grieving people, for grieving people. All of the essays are organized by type of loss and different situations, and offer advice and resources to explore loss. Modern Loss speaks to a younger audience and seeks to share and build community around the awkwardness and unknowability of grief.

## **Psychology Today** [psychologytoday.com/us](http://psychologytoday.com/us)

Psychology Today hosts an incredibly comprehensive network of professionals and the tools to help you to search for therapists and support groups in your area. It's possible to find people that specialize in different areas of psychology, including grief support

## **Refuge in Grief** [refugeingrief.com](http://refugeingrief.com)

Refuge in Grief is an online community that was started by psychotherapists and grief advocates. It provides resources for both grieving and non-grieving individuals to guide them through the grieving process. Their course, Writing Your Grief provides guided writing exercises that help explore grief and establishes a community of people who recognize each others' grief.

## **Talk Death** [talkdeath.com](http://talkdeath.com)

Talk Death is an online resource for creating positive and constructive conversations about death and everything that comes with it. They provide a wide variety of resources for all of the details of death. Think of it as the BuzzFeed of grief support.

***The Dead Moms Club: A Memoir about Death, Grief, and Surviving the Mother of All Losses* Kate Spencer**

Kate Spencer tells the story of the raw emotions that she felt following the loss of her mom in her 20s and for years later. Her frankness about how awful losing a parent is a good glimpse into what grief really can be like.

***From Here to Eternity: Traveling the World to Find the Good Death* Caitlin Doughty**

Caitlin Doughty works to reform the funeral system in the US, but in her second book, she documents the funeral practices of other cultures. By attending ceremonies and speaking with families, she is able to bring meaning to and describe the comfort people find in what we might not understand.

***It's OK That You're Not OK* Megan Devine**

Written by the creator of *Refuge in Grief*, this book offers practical advice for grieving people that challenges what we think about grief and how to address the struggles that come along with it. Through personal accounts, creative approaches, and actual advice from grief therapists, Devine allows grieving people to take things at their own pace.

***The Good Death: An Exploration of Dying in America***

**Ann Neumann**

Using her personal experiences with death and time volunteering with Hospice, Neumann explores what it means to die in America. Her book provides a look at the way we understand the end of life to talk about how we can value it as a part of life.



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