

The term “Grief” is used to describe reactions and feelings that a person might have to the loss of someone or something that is important to them.



The feeling of loss not only covers the immediate loss of a relationship, good health, a job, a way of life or the death of a loved one, but also includes the loss of generations of family bonds, the removal of links to spiritual land rights or neglect of the cultural heritage.

What is grief?

Grief is not an illness – it can not be cured or hurried along. No two people experience grief in the same way. It is affected by many factors such as the nature of the loss, the person’s past history, their cultural and spiritual beliefs, and their personality. There is no right or wrong way to experience grief. Some common grief reactions include:

- Sadness, crying
- Shock, numbness
- Difficulty accepting the loss
- Anger, guilt, shame
- Isolation, alienation, loneliness
- Relief
- Fear that reactions may not be normal
- Suicidal thoughts
- Difficulty concentrating
- Acting out of character
- Substance abuse
- Physical reactions – headaches, loss of appetite, inability to sleep

How long does grief last?

You can’t put a time limit on grief. The best answer seems to be “as long as it takes”. Grief doesn’t occur in neat stages. It is a chaotic process, which is different for each person.



We don’t recover from grief as we might from some physical illness. Instead, we gradually learn to adjust to the loss. This adjustment process depends on how you express your grief and other feelings, your life experience, previous losses, coping style, personality, physical health and available support systems.

There are no simple solutions to getting over the pain caused by your loss. At this time you may feel that no person, no words, no reading material can ease the pain. However, when you feel ready, the information below may be helpful.

Why are there differences in how people grieve?

We are all different. We come from different family backgrounds and cultures. Every culture has traditions, rules and expectations about how grief is expressed and dealt with. This tool kit cannot capture the cultural diversity here in Australia. It describes common experiences and aims to provide individuals with tools to help manage grief.



Tool Kit

1 Let yourself grieve

It is important to be able to express grief rather than 'bottling up' feelings. At times you may feel overwhelmed by the intensity of your feelings, but that is normal. You can postpone grief, but you can not avoid it. Not dealing with grief makes it harder to cope with other stresses that may come later.

Not everybody expresses grief by crying. There are many other ways including:

- Physical activity
- Music
- Writing
- Painting, drawing, etc.
- Talking about the loss
- Praying
- Meditating
- Keeping a diary of feelings and memories
- Story telling
- Other activities and ceremonies from your culture or local area



2 Look after yourself

Coping with grief is stressful on your body. Look after yourself so that you're better able to cope with the changes you are going through.

- Eat healthy, frequent, small, easily digested meals.
- Don't use alcohol or drugs to reduce your grief – they numb feelings that need to be expressed.
- Give yourself time out from the pain – do something you enjoy.
- Connect with yourself – through religion, meditation, music, walking, gardening, sport, hobbies.

3 Postpone major life decisions

Right now, because of the stress you are under, you may not have the ability to make good long-term decisions. It can be tempting to make decisions quickly, or be pressured into making certain decisions. If possible, delay major decisions until a time that you can better deal with them. If decisions have to be made now, speak to someone you trust who is not directly affected by the loss.



4 Keep mementos

It may seem sensible to remove the belongings of the person who has died, or items that are associated with the loss. It may be painful to have them around. If this is the case, give the items to someone until you feel better able to deal with them. Some of the items that have sentimental value may be very comforting to you later. Giving away belongings, at an appropriate time, is also a healthy part of grieving.

5 Let people know how they can help

Your friends and family may not know what to say or do when they are with you. This makes things difficult for both of you. Let them know how you are feeling, and what you would like them to do. Tell them if there are practical things that they can do to help you out. It is okay to say that you are not ready to talk about your loss, and that you will let them know when you are.

You need to be around people who are supportive, understanding and willing to help.

Friends and family may not always be able to give you the kind of emotional support you need. Develop a resource list of people, services, or places to contact when the going gets tough. Here are some ideas:

- Counsellors and/or psychologists
- Bringing Them Home Counsellors, who specialise in Stolen Generation issues
- Healing Circles or other similar cultural healing groups
- Bereavement support groups
- Doctors
- Priest, minister or religious leaders

These services can be located through your local aboriginal medical service, community health centre, doctor, mental health services, funeral director, or religious group.

6 Let yourself heal

Healing does not have to mean letting go or saying goodbye. Do not feel guilty for beginning to move through your grief and on with your life. It does not mean the loss does not matter. It can be helpful to enjoy happy memories by talking, smiling and laughing about them.

Set aside some time alone each day to express your grief, look after yourself, or even just to remember. Spend time with friends and family to talk, tell your story, or share your grief. Some people find a support group useful because it provides access to others who may have more of an understanding of what you are experiencing.



7 Know that you can come through this

You may never be the same person again, but you can survive this. You may not think so, but you can. Sometimes old beliefs and ideas seem empty and useless because of what has happened. They may need to be adapted to suit a new set of circumstances.

Take one moment or one day at a time. Set your own limits and learn to say no. Expect some set backs, but know that you will progress through them. This may be the hardest thing you will ever do, so be patient with yourself.



8 Be prepared for stressful situations and events

Stressful situations and events include birthdays, Christmas, anniversaries, or hearing about situations that remind you of your own loss. These can be less stressful if you are prepared for them:

- Be aware of places that evoke strong memories.
- Plan activities for remembrance, such as writing a card or doing something to acknowledge the loss.
- Let yourself be sad even if it is meant to be a happy occasion.
- Let yourself have fun – enjoy happy memories and the company of other people close to you.

Sometimes the time leading up to these events is the hardest. The day itself may not be as hard as you fear.

9 When does grief become a problem?

Sometimes people are unable to come to terms with their loss and are unable to move on with life. They might become stuck in either constant grief and sadness, or become involved in a range of activities to avoid feeling the pain of their loss. This can have a bad effect on relationships and may lead to an increased risk of physical or mental illness.

If there is concern that you or someone you know may be having problems grieving, a doctor, psychologist or counsellor can determine if there is in fact a problem.

10 Information for family and friends

It's hard to know how to help or what to say to someone who is experiencing grief. These ideas might help:

- Let them know you care – acknowledge their loss and what it means to them.
- Let them know how you feel – that you don't know what to say, but you want to help.
- Be there to listen – when they want to talk, let them tell their story.
- Let them know it's okay to express their grief – even though it is hard to see them so upset.
- Keep in touch – let them know you are available. Keep including them in activities. They may not wish to join in, but give them the option.
- Be tolerant – they may behave out of character.
- Look out for signs of suicide or being stuck in grief and sadness.
- Find help and information if they need or want extra support.
- Look after yourself – take time out, talk to someone about how you are feeling.

What not to do:

- Don't minimise their loss.
- Don't think you can take away their pain.
- Don't tell them "You'll get over it".
- Don't say "I know how you feel" – everyone is different.

We often do or say these things because we want to help. It's hard to stand by and watch someone we care about go through so much pain. Sometimes we are also reminded of our own feelings of loss. The best way to help the person is just to be there for them.



Where to get help

Useful resources

Lifeline	13 11 14
Link-Up Aboriginal Corporation	1800 624 332
Kids Helpline	1800 55 1800
Mensline Australia	1300 789 978
Sane Australia Helpline	1800 688 382

Your local Aboriginal Medical Service or Community Health Centre

Your local Aboriginal Liaison Officer within your local Council

For help finding other services, call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or visit the web site at www.lifeline.org.au



This tool kit has been developed by the Illawarra Aboriginal Medical Service in conjunction with the Lifeline Information Service as a public service for the Illawarra Aboriginal communities. You are welcome to reproduce it without alteration. Please contact the Lifeline Information Service if you would like this tool kit to be adapted to specifically suit your community.

We invite your feedback and comments at infoservice@lifeline.org.au



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