

Supporting someone through grief



Change and loss are an inevitable part of life, but some changes can be particularly challenging (such as the death of someone we love / Sorry Business, separation, divorce, or long-term illness, to name a few). People can react in different ways and sometimes we are unsure how to respond. This guide may help support a partner, relative, colleague or friend who is grieving.

What is grief?

Grief is a normal and natural response to the hurt we feel following major change in our lives. It affects our emotions as well as having a physical impact on our bodies. Grief can challenge the way we think about ourselves and the world, including our values and beliefs, and may influence relationships, too.

How do we express grief?

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Some people openly express their hurt, while others withdraw. Each of us experiences grief in unique and personal ways.

Here are some of the wide-ranging reactions that may be experienced:

Feelings

- sadness
- anxiety, fretfulness and feeling emotionally overwhelmed
- anger, frustration or disillusionment.

Thoughts

- disbelief
- confusion
- sense of presence or detachment
- preoccupation.

Behaviours

- expressing big emotions, masking emotions or frequent emotional ups and downs
- difficulty concentrating or undertaking usual tasks
- restless over-activity
- absentmindedness
- visiting places and carrying mementos
- avoiding reminders.

Physical reactions

- sleep and appetite changes
- digestive problems
- physical aches and pains
- lack of energy.



The grief process

Grief is a challenging and complex time of hurt, but it is a normal part of life. It is important to remember that people who are grieving are not 'unwell,' but they may need additional support and kindness.

In thinking about how best to support someone who is grieving it can be helpful to understand the grief response as a process or journey.

To journey through grief we need:

Time

- opportunities to take some 'time out' from responsibilities to grieve or to rest
- no time pressure around how long grief 'should' last.

Safe spaces

- safe spaces to retreat to when emotions arise
- reassurance that our feelings and reactions are normal
- safe ways to express different intense emotions (such as sadness, anger, fear, guilt or humour) without hurting ourselves or others
- opportunities to talk through emotions and reactions without judgement or criticism.

Companionship

- someone to listen – listening is often more important than knowing exactly what to say
- at least one person to cry, vent and reflect with, sometimes laugh with, or just to sit quietly with
- accompaniment – sometimes for appointments or errands, or for activities such as a walk, meal, concert, or undertaking an arts project.

Support

- practical support in managing day-to-day responsibilities to alleviate added stress and create the emotional space for grief
- acknowledgment of loss, as well as acceptance, empathy and acts of kindness from our wider social circles.

Whether you are supporting someone through the daily ups and downs of grief or checking-in from afar, you can identify yourself as someone who is open and willing to listen, without forcing them to talk or share. Take your cues from the grieving person and try not to take things personally if they would like some space.

Keep checking-in regularly to see how they are going, including for many months after the loss. Bear in mind that while the intensity of the pain may lessen over time, the sadness may never completely go away.

Further social and emotional wellbeing support

The **Seasons for Growth Adult Program** is an evidence-based learning program for adults seeking guidance and a safe space to work through loss and grief. The small-group program is facilitated by a trained Companion and draws on the rich metaphor of the seasons. It uses safe, creative learning activities to practise new ways of thinking and responding to experiences of change and loss and enhances protective factors (building personal resilience) while minimising risk factors (such as isolation) that can impact mental health and wellbeing.

The Seasons for Healing Program provides culturally safe support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait adults, offering an educational, cultural and therapeutic approach to assist in healing from loss and grief.

Useful links for support:

Keeping Spirit Strong Support Directory supporting First Nations families and communities experiencing loss and grief.

Supporting children and young people through grief.

Contact us

1300 379 569 | info.seasons@mackillop.org.au