

Coping with Grief

What is grief?

Grief is a natural and emotional reaction to the loss of someone or something important to you. The loss can be a person, an object, or even a way of life. During a time of loss, emotions can be intensely painful, affecting all aspects of life and relationships. In the midst of this struggle, it is important to realize that grief is normal; it is not an illness and it is not something negative. Grief shows that you cared deeply for whatever it is that you lost.

For some people, grief might be felt in spikes throughout the day, for others it may suddenly come up every few days. Some have compared it to feeling as though they are drowning due to the tidal waves of emotion that affect them at times. Others might say that it feels like it's an extra weight on their heart or shoulders that they carry around with them wherever they go. Everyone experiences grief differently and on a different timeline; your emotional response to grief may be very different from what you've seen or how you anticipate you may react.

The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ experienced many losses throughout his life and taught us that grief is a real and natural emotional response. The Prophet ﷺ manifested his grief on different occasions and demonstrated the permissibility of showing our feelings of sadness when we lose something precious.

What to expect during times of grief

Grief involves a struggle to re-establish equilibrium in your life. Creating a new balance involves external, internal, and spiritual adjustments. Some of these adjustments include: accepting the way the loss you've experienced impacts your daily life and everyday functioning in the world; confronting the impact this loss has on your sense of self; and processing the effect this loss has on your beliefs, values, and your connection with Allah (swt) as well as others in your life. While your grief experience will be unique, exploring ways to process and cope with these changes can be helpful in the healing process.



Denial and shock

When the entire world is changing around you and life looks like you're walking through a movie script rather than reality, experiencing a sense of shock is a normal response. Experiencing a feeling of denial of reality is a confusing state of mind that occurs before we fully grasp the gravity of what is happening and can be accompanied by feelings of disbelief or disregard for the reality of the situation.

Sadness

Sadness is usually associated with loss. You might feel down and cry more often than you usually do. It may also feel like you have less motivation and find less enjoyment in activities you used to love.

Anxiety and/or fear

Loss causes sadness but it can also cause a great deal of anxiety as the world feels unpredictable. Your anxiousness may be experienced as general nervousness, heart palpitations, restlessness, irritability, and/or difficulty breathing.

Emotional paralysis

The entire world is undergoing collective trauma with the experience of COVID-19. When we experience trauma individually, we tend to go into one of three modes: fight, flight, or freeze. Freezing up may lead you to feel like you can't get up and do anything. You might also feel like you can't make decisions or know what the next step is.

Guilt

There are many reasons why someone might feel guilty during this time. There might be spiritual guilt that collective sins led to this happening or not being appreciative of how life was before (seeing that it's so much more difficult now). Those who are privileged with financial security may feel guilty that others are struggling economically. Those privileged with larger homes may feel guilty that others are enduring quarantine in tiny living spaces. Those with limited resources may feel guilty that they can not provide sustenance for their family members.

Anger

Anger is a normal emotional reaction during times of loss. Anger is the body's natural reaction to threat and, oftentimes, there is no greater threat than the loss of someone you love or the loss of the way you envisioned life would be. Anger can also feel powerful during times when we feel powerless. You may find yourself experiencing thoughts like "Why is this happening?" If you have loved ones who are not taking precautions against contracting COVID-19, you may experience anger toward them. Those who have lost their jobs may feel anger at being unable to care for their families financially. Anger toward God may also come up during various losses wondering, "I've done everything right so why me?",

Coping with grief and loss

1. Coping as an individual

- Talk to someone you trust about your feelings openly. There is no shame in having difficult feelings like sadness or worry, Expressing these feelings is not being ungrateful to Allah, but a means for feeling better emotionally and spiritually,
- "Name it to tame it" technique: When you notice a strong emotional reaction, describe or "name" what you're experiencing. Choosing words to describe your emotions calms down the emotion-driven part of your brain and jump-starts the part of your brain responsible for handling emotions and making decisions.
- Volunteer or help others. Research shows that helping others supports good mental health and well-being. It is also a great way to get ajr and give back to the community.
- Practice gratitude. Identifying things you are looking forward to in the morning, things you are grateful for in the evening, or showing appreciation to others are all great ways to feel better and strengthen your mental health.
- Do things on behalf of your deceased loved one. Donate to a cause or donate good deeds on their behalf. Make du'a for them and to be reunited with them in jannah.
- Get out into nature. Research has found that spending time in a natural setting can lessen the effects of physical and mental stress and can be helpful for feelings of anxiety and depression.
- Write your feelings as a way to process them and get them out in healthy ways. If it makes you feel more comfortable, then you can rip up what you wrote after you are finished
- Write a letter to your deceased loved one sharing anything and everything you wish you could have said. This is especially helpful if you weren't able to be there when your loved one passed
- Spend time alone with Allah thanking Him, praising Him and asking Him for help. Remember that duo is always answered either by getting what you want, getting something better, or having something negative averted from you.
- Allow yourself to cry. Tears are not a sign of weakness. The Prophet g referred to his tears of grief as a mercy, Research has shown that crying can help restore our bodies to a state of balance by releasing stress."
- Stay physically active. Trauma gets stored in the body and research suggests that movement and expressive therapies help facilitate it being released. Being active also keeps you mentally and physically healthy and can be a great way to cope with anger.
- Use grounding when you're feeling overwhelmed. Intense emotions can be very destabilizing, and you may feel that your head is cloudy and that your body is disoriented. Focusing on the immediate present with all your senses can bring you back to the present. Try making wudu' and focusing on the sound sight and feeling of the water as a way to ground yourself.
- Consider ways in which you carry your loved one's legacy through memories, things you learned from them, similar habits and qualities you possess.
- Express your anger or frustration through art or creative activities. This can include painting, sketching, gardening, cooking, or building something. Trying to engage in something new or challenging to stimulate your brain and elicit your talent. If you are not talented in this arena, that's ok because the process is more important than the end-product.

2. Coping as a family

- Share your hopes for the future. Discuss plans and consider the things you would like to do once things have normalized a bit more.
- Create family traditions that your loved one would have appreciated and make the intention that this new family ritual will be a source of reward for your loved one in the Hereafter.
- Don't feel the need to hide feelings of sadness from your children after experiencing a loss. Talk to them about how losing someone hurts and it's ok to feel sad. This gives them permission to grieve as well.
- Speak with family members about how they are feeling. If they are in denial or engaging in reckless behavior, try your best to understand their perspective. Compassion is more likely going to get you further in understanding what's going on than criticism.
- Get out in nature as a family. Take a walk amongst the trees and follow your children's lead as they stop to observe small things you may have otherwise missed.
- Reflect on some of the Names of Allah & as a family and consider the ways these Names manifest in your lives.
- Create a du'ā list together and place it somewhere accessible.
- Create a gratitude tradition in your family where you each share one thing you are grateful for or particularly appreciate about someone. This helps to reinforce the idea that blessings can be found even in the darkest of times.
- Share memories about your loved one with those closest to you.
- Have patience and compassion for yourself and others who are grieving. This is a difficult time for all of you and you will not be at your best, which is ok.

3. Coping as a community

- Make congregational du'ā for the deceased, those suffering, and the bereaved.
- Assemble a group of volunteers to follow-up with bereaved families regarding any support they may need.
- Offer mental health webinars to reach a broad audience on mental wellness and coping during difficult times.
- Offer support groups for those interested in coping collectively.
- Consider creative outlets for honoring those who passed like making a community garden, tree planting, or creating a page on a community website where families can input their loved one's names and du'a for them.
- Collect donations for burials for those who may be unable to afford this cost.
- If you are an imam or community organizer, conduct periodic and consistent debriefings on how changes are affecting your local community. Dispel rumors and stick with facts as much as possible.

How to help someone who is grieving



In addition to grieving yourself, you may find that you also need to be there for others in your life. Providing support to others can be tricky at times since everyone grieves differently. While there is no formula to help someone in their grief there are some basic tips when you find yourself in that situation.

1. Supporting vs. comforting

When we see loved ones crying, in pain or suffering our initial inclination is to help remove whatever is distressing them. That is because we care about our loved ones and want what is best for them. However, with death and some other kinds of loss is that there is nothing to fix or do that can bring back what was lost. Additionally, when people are in the midst of grief the last thing they want is for someone to minimize how they are feeling by being told that “everything will be ok” or that “what happened was for the best.” While these statements may be true, many grieving people report they can not stand hearing cliché statements and that it causes them to feel resentment and want to further isolate themselves.

One helpful tip in trying to be there for others is to be supportive instead of comforting. These terms sound the same, but they are different; comforting someone implies you are trying to rescue them from their pain, whereas supporting someone is helping by however they need help. When you support someone you are meeting them emotionally wherever they are, recognizing what they need and helping them meet those needs if possible.

2. General things to say or not say

A list of things to say or not say can be overwhelming for those trying to help, however, there are a few things to keep in mind when talking to the bereaved:

- Be genuine and don't talk unnecessarily, especially using cliché statements, to pass the time. If the person cries, it's ok to sit there in silence.
- If you feel like you want to hold the person's hand or hug them, ask first. Some people are very sensitive to others touching them without permission and the gesture can be disturbing to them.
- If the person who is grieving wants to talk about the dead, follow their lead and participate in the conversation however they want to engage. If the person wants to talk about everything except the dead, this is ok too and should be respected.

3. Ways you can support others

You can determine how to support others by asking them directly. Don't make assumptions or try to impose yourself based on what you think they want. Here are some things you can do for grieving families if they express interest:

- Spend time with them. If it's safe and appropriate, you can do this in person. If there is a health hazard, you can do this on the phone or by Zoom. Please note that bereaved family members are in a lot of pain and have lots of things to do. If they ask you to spend prolonged time with them, then do so; otherwise, don't take up their time unnecessarily. Also under no circumstances should you impose yourself as a guest and expect them to host you with food and drink. Keep in mind that this type of imposition is not from the Prophet's ﷺ sunnah.
- Offer to help by buying groceries, doing household chores, or watching their children. Make sure not to insinuate that they have a messy home or need your help as this may make them feel self-conscious or guilty.
- Ask if they would like you to check on them from time to time, and follow up with that frequency. Many times people stop asking about mourners' well-being shortly after the funeral.
- Make du'ā' for them. If they are sensitive about this (and some people are), you don't need to remind them that you are making du'ā' for them—you can do this in private.

How to be there for others when you are grieving

Being there for others is a social responsibility and can be a great source of ajr (reward for good deeds).

It is important, however, when taking care of other people's needs to not neglect one's own family or self. Finding a balance will help prevent from feeling burned out, fatigued, and depressed over time. Tips for taking care of yourself while you take care of others include:

- Get adequate sleep and eat healthily
- Make sure that your basic needs are met like going to work on time, paying bills, and spending time with your own family
- Find time to decompress, however that might work for you. For some people this may include praying, making du'ā', reading, art, working out, or engaging in a hobby.
- If you are feeling depressed or fatigued, take time off. Your body and well-being are an amānah from Allah that you need to take care of. Taking time off doesn't mean that you are lazy or neglecting others.

When to seek professional support



During the coronavirus pandemic it is expected that most, if not all, people will have some difficulties adjusting. Difficult feelings like anxiety, sadness, and anger do not mean that the person is mentally ill, unstable, or that there is something wrong with them. If a person is experiencing really intense emotions for a prolonged period of time, however, it would be useful for them to check in with a mental health professional.

One major indicator that someone needs professional help is if they demonstrate an impaired ability to function in their day-to-day life with their family, at work, socially, emotionally, and sometimes spiritually. Again, this doesn't mean that the person is mentally ill, but that they would likely benefit from talking to someone with expertise in the field of mental health. Signs that someone might be struggling include:

- Not getting enough sleep when the person needs rest or sleeping too much
- Feeling immobilized and unable to get basic daily tasks done
- Anger, irritability, and frustration with those around them
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Desire for death or being preoccupied with thoughts about death
- Hearing or seeing things that are not there
- Substance abuse

- Impaired concentration and focus (beyond what the average person in the pandemic might be experiencing)
- For children, tantrums beyond what is expected for the age of the child
- For children, aggressive behaviour towards others including hitting, throwing objects, damaging property, or biting

If you or someone you know is experiencing thoughts of self-harm, it's imperative to get help right away. Don't worry about hurting the person's feelings or them feeling betrayed by you, as saving life is the most important goal and the person will likely be glad about what you did later. You can get immediate help by taking the person to the local hospital or calling the police.



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