

Find your way through

When you lose a loved one, each member of your family is also losing someone they deeply care about. And sometimes, they'll need you to lean on.

BY JESSICA ABELSOHN

Grief can take form in numerous ways. In each family dynamic, you'll find multiple ways of people dealing with loss. Whether it's a child, a parent, a grandchild or a sibling, every member of the family will grieve in a different way. And at times, they may need someone else's help to find a way through the pain.

When a child, a grandchild or a spouse needs you, it can be difficult to lend your support when you're grieving too. But there are some practical ways that you can help to ensure that your family are getting

the support they need to grieve in the time and way they wish.

Be open to grief

Grief is nothing to be ashamed of. It's an everyday fact of life. Perhaps what's most important to remember is that grief may never go away – and you need to be ok with this.

Catherine Wilson, Clinical Psychologist at Uplift Psychology, says it's crucial to have realistic expectations of the grief process. “[One needs to] Recognise that living with grief is a lifelong process of getting used to the person not being physically

present with us,” she says. “It is a process of adaptation.”

And with grief may come a whirlwind of other effects. According to Wilson, these can include memory loss, problems with concentration and energy levels, or struggling to find pleasure in things you used to enjoy. But it's crucial to be kind to yourself.

“Be flexible with yourself, making plans that can be changed to match your capacity and needs on a particular day,” Wilson advises. “Try to balance self-care that includes doing less, with continued engagement in life.”





Perhaps the key here is trying to still engage with life while recognising that the grief you're feeling may never go away.

"Understand that grief will not have an end point, but that it will feel different with time, and accept that grief will be present, and come and go in waves."

What's important is continuing to live your life, while still allowing yourself time to grieve – no matter how long ago you lost your loved one.

Try not to crawl into a shell, especially when you have children and grandchildren who may need you. While life is different now and difficult, it can also be different in positive ways.

Find the support

It's quite common for people who are grieving to present with physical symptoms, however, the majority of the issue is cognitive and emotional. According to Julijana Chochovski, many adults who are grieving will feel more than mere sadness. "People who are grieving will often report crying spells, some trouble sleeping, and lack of productivity at work," she



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explains.

"Over the years, research continues to demonstrate how the loss of a loved one can trigger depression and a sense of isolation in older people."

For all symptoms associated with the death of a loved one, there is help available. Mentally speaking, the main goal of grief counselling is to help the patient accept what has happened, and give them tools to cope further. "Helping a person work through the process of grief involves getting the individual to the point where they can talk about the loss," Chochovski says. "People may find comfort in knowing that their feelings of anger and guilt are normal, and that these emotions do not discount the many happy memories."

What's key, as the patient, is to recognise that you need help

and actually seek it out, whether it's with family and friends or a professional service.

"Be clear with yourself and others about what you need, and allow them to support you," Wilson says. "Be realistic about what others can provide you with – not everyone will be able to meet your needs in exactly the way you need them to, or at the time you need them to. But if you are clear about your needs, you will give them the opportunity to help if they can."

According to Chochovski, there are several of grief counselling including encouraging the bereaved to accept the loss, helping the patient to express their feelings and understand how best to cope. And of course, identifying coping mechanisms for the bereaved to do on their own.

Stick to it at home

Of course, there's no point seeking the professional support if it doesn't continue at home. And at times, the healing process will be largely up to you. Activities you can do yourself will also largely depend »

on your relationship with the person who has died.

If it's a parent or a child, perhaps continue with their work, if you can. If they volunteer in the community, join the program too.

Or, you can donate something or complete something in their memory.

For grandchildren, you can help the process by acknowledging the relationship and find ways you can keep the deceased alive in their eyes. Make a photo book of all the memories, choose a special item of clothing and create a pillow or bear for their room. Or make a memory box, filled with things that remind you and your family of your loved one.

But, what's most important is, says Wilson is that you be kind to yourself. "Engage in life and be compassionate towards yourself," she says.

And remember that grieving isn't a one week, one month or one year concept. It's something that is all-encompassing. In fact, it changes you. But that's ok. Because it means the memory of the one you loved will stay with you. ••

HELPING THE YOUNGER GENERATIONS

It's natural to want to protect your children and grandchildren from the pain of grief. But it's crucial to allow them to find their own way, with guidance of course. The key when it comes to children especially, is being open and honest, and while keeping it child-friendly, be truthful in your explanations. A child needs to understand that their loved one isn't coming back. Importantly, "do not use euphemisms for death, which can be confusing and scary for children," Wilson says.

This is reiterated by Chochovski. "Not talking about death indicates that the subject is taboo and does not help a child to cope with loss," she explains. "Use clear, direct language. Explanations should be simple and straightforward. Euphemisms such as 'she passed away' or 'we lost him' are best avoided, as they can confuse and alarm children."

Both Wilson and Chochovski stress the importance of giving as much information to the child as he or she is able to understand, and talking in language that they can comprehend. The key when it comes to helping children is listening to their concerns and reassuring them accordingly.

Also, remember, that a child's grief is different to that of an adult.

"Unlike adults, children do not experience continual and intense emotional reactions," Chochovski explains. You may think the child is not coping or processing things properly because of their childlike ability to be sad one minute and playing the next. However, this could not be further from the truth. A child's mind protects them from things they cannot handle, and because sometimes they are not able to verbally explain their feelings, their behaviour will speak for them. Moments of anger or fear may indicate that they are struggling.

"Children may seem to show grief only occasionally and briefly, but in reality, a child's grief usually lasts longer than that of an adult. Mourning in children may need to be addressed again and again as the child gets older," Chochovski says.

Bereavement is a process and as the child grows and develops mentally, they will think about the loss time and time again, especially during important times when their loved ones are supposed to be present.

SUPPORT SERVICES

In Australia, there are several support groups available, particularly for older Australians.

- COTA: www.cota.org.au/australia
- Carers Australia: www.carersaustralia.com.au
- Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement: www.grief.org.au



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