



My Grief

**A resource developed for those bereaved
by the 2009 Victorian bushfires**



australian centre
for **grief** and
bereavement

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The Experience of Grief

Grief can affect all aspects of life, including our thoughts, feelings, behaviours, beliefs, physical health and our relationships with others.

Common grief emotions

- sadness
- anger
- anxiety
- disbelief
- panic
- mood swings
- relief
- fear
- irritability
- numbness
- guilt
- emptiness.

Grief is an individual experience

Everyone's grief journey is different. Your grief is unique to you, and as long as you are not causing harm to yourself or those around you, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' ways to grieve. Grief is individual and personal, and it's important to respect each other's way of grieving, even if we don't necessarily understand it.

Life grows around grief

It is a common myth that people 'get over' grief. The reality is, a part of us will always grieve the loss of our loved one. With time, the pain will lessen, but the sorrow we feel will always be a part of us. There is no 'return to normal' but, rather, we learn to live around a new kind of normal.

Grief doesn't have a timeline

Grief can be triggered at any time, and it's OK to admit you are struggling with your grief, whether it be weeks, months, years or even decades after the death.

Grief and Trauma

Trauma can occur when we are exposed to distressing events that pose a threat to our personal safety, or the safety of those around us. It can also occur when we find out about such events.

Sometimes trauma reactions don't appear until some time after the event. People experiencing trauma symptoms may try to suppress them or avoid situations that could trigger these responses. Understanding grief and processing trauma, however, can be an important step in beginning to heal.

Common responses to traumatic events

Trauma responses are your mind and body's way of trying to process what has occurred. Some common responses to traumatic events may include:

- depression, anxiety, panic, fears and phobias
- anger and blame
- nightmares, dreams and flashbacks
- sleeping difficulties
- social withdrawal
- confusion and issues with concentration and decision making
- physical symptoms, e.g. headaches, nausea, aches and pains, changes in appetite
- feelings of helplessness and disbelief
- feeling unsafe
- being 'clingy' or experiencing separation anxiety.

Sharing your experiences and feelings can go a long way in helping to process trauma. Be aware that avoiding or suppressing trauma responses can prolong them and that trying to numb the pain with alcohol, drugs and addictive substances is not a solution, and can cause problems in the long term.

If you are struggling, particularly following a traumatic event, don't be afraid to seek professional advice from a GP, counsellor, psychologist or other health practitioner.



Grief Triggers

After a physical injury, our body heals and forms a tougher layer around the injury site, known as scar tissue. If it gets a knock or scratch later on, it might hurt or ache, reminding us of that injury from our past. This concept often resonates with people experiencing grief, in that often we are triggered by something unexpected that takes us back to the time of the loss.

Triggers often occur without warning and may include:

- faces
- pictures
- sounds
- smells
- words or phrases
- touch
- music.

Will these feelings ever stop?

With time, grief triggers usually become less frequent; however, it is common for triggers to still occur from time to time, even years or decades later. When an unexpected wave of grief comes over you, try to ride it out rather than fight against it. Remember, the expression of sadness is as natural as the expression of happiness, and suppressing these feelings won't make them go away.

Grief and Anxiety

Fear and anxiety are normal emotions that we all feel from time to time; however, when these feelings become excessive, overwhelming, distressing or begin to interfere with daily life, they become a problem that needs to be addressed.

Common symptoms of anxiety

Common symptoms of anxiety can include:

- tightening of the chest
- racing heartbeat
- hot and cold flushes
- constant and repetitive worrying
- obsessive thinking, e.g. having the same thoughts over and over again
- compulsive behaviour.

What can help?

If you are concerned about the level of anxiety in your life, it is important to seek professional assessment and support from your GP and/or health professional.

Other things you can do which may help include:

- breathing – deep, slow and focused, especially into the lower abdomen, as this refocuses the energy of the anxiety and grounds you back into your body
- writing things down or journaling
- relaxation activities
- maintaining a healthy and balanced lifestyle
- attending a support group.

For further information on anxiety, visit www.beyondblue.org.au

Grief and the Body

How grief can affect the body

People who are grieving often experience physical symptoms and ill health, both in the immediacy of the bereavement, and over time.

Common physical responses may include:

- sleeping difficulties
- lack of strength/physical exhaustion
- feelings of heaviness and numbness
- confusion or being unable to concentrate
- feeling constantly tired or run down
- dietary problems and stomach upsets
- lack of appetite
- headaches
- weakened immune system/frequently getting sick, e.g. colds and flu
- stress and anxiety.

Your body is a good measuring stick for assessing whether or not you are overdoing things or not taking care of yourself properly.

Grief responses or everyday responses?

It's easy to confuse one's grief with other normal life events – especially in the long term. Grief can sometimes act like a cloud or fog that disguises other issues. For example, if you are experiencing difficulties or stresses at work, it may be hard to differentiate whether your grief is a factor or whether it's simply a normal reaction to the situation.

It's important to stop and ask yourself: *Is the way I'm feeling related to my loss or is it something else?* If you are unsure, it may be helpful to talk to friends, family, your GP, health professional, or a counsellor.



Grief and Diet

When grieving, it is common for the bereaved to experience either loss of appetite or alternatively, an increased appetite.

It can be all too easy to disregard healthy eating; however, what we eat (or don't eat) can have a real impact on our ability to get through each day.

Tips around grief and diet

- Try to maintain a healthy and balanced diet.
- Fried foods, caffeine, alcohol and tobacco can affect your moods negatively, so try to use in moderation.
- If overeating, try to identify before you eat whether you're genuinely hungry, or emotional eating.
- Eating due to loneliness is quite common. Consider connecting with friends, family or your local community to ease this isolation.
- If you find your appetite has dramatically decreased, try to find foods which you can graze on, e.g. fruit, yoghurt, liquid supplements, nuts, soup.
- Try eating small, regular meals instead of three big ones.
- Some people experience digestion issues and stomach upsets. If these persist, seek advice from your GP, health professional or a nutritionist.

Grief and Physical Activity

When grieving, it can be beneficial to engage in physical activity as a way of releasing tension, lifting mood and distracting yourself from the intensity of your grief.

Try to incorporate some kind of physical activity in your daily routine. You don't have to be a serious athlete to experience the benefits. Even going for a 30-minute walk can make a big difference to your overall health and wellbeing. The fresh air and sunshine will help to increase energy and the body releases its own natural endorphins, which make you feel good.

Simple ideas for incorporating physical activity into your lifestyle

- go for a walk during your lunch break
- join a sports club or exercise class
- vacuuming/cleaning the house
- walk down to the local shops
- gardening, e.g. digging, pruning, weeding
- start or join a walking group
- playing with your children, grandchildren or nephews/nieces
- mowing the lawn
- if taking public transport, park further away from the stop/station or get off a stop early and walk the rest of the way
- dance to your favourite music.

Please note: If you have a pre-existing health condition, make sure you speak to your GP before commencing or increasing physical activity.



Grief and Sleep

It is normal and extremely common for sleeping patterns to be disturbed when grieving.

Insomnia

Insomnia (being unable to sleep) is a normal and common physical reaction in those who are grieving, especially when trauma is a factor, or other stressful events are occurring in your life. Insomnia can affect your concentration, memory and mood, and can also increase your risk of accidents or injury.

Tips for managing insomnia

- Avoid stimulants such as tea, coffee, tobacco and caffeinated drinks before bed.
- If you can't sleep, get up and do something else until you feel sleepy again.
- Do something relaxing before bed, e.g. take a warm bath, listen to relaxing music.
- Minimise stress and anxiety where possible – writing things down, journaling or talking to someone can be helpful.
- The idea of a 'good night's sleep' will differ widely from person to person. Try to stop expecting a specific amount of sleep each night – it's OK to fall short of the ideal.
- If considering natural and/or over-the-counter remedies, seek advice from a pharmacist or health professional before using.
- Warm and soothing drinks such as herbal tea or warm milk before bed may be helpful.

Oversleeping

Some people respond to grief by oversleeping. They have trouble getting up in the morning and feel constantly tired.

Tips for managing oversleeping

- Try to maintain normal sleeping hours where possible.
- Set a time that you will go to bed and a time you will get up each day.
- In the mornings, try using events such as going to work, catching up with someone or going to an appointment to motivate you to get up at the appointed time.

Self-care

Self-care means you looking after you. When we are grieving, or supporting someone who is grieving, it can be all too easy to neglect our own physical and emotional health and wellbeing. Taking the time to look after yourself, however, can make a big difference in your ability to function on a day-to-day basis, especially in the long term.

Tips around self-care

Self-care may take the form of:

- rest and relaxation, e.g. sleep, massage, meditation
- physical activity, e.g. walking, cycling, gardening, team sports
- eating a healthy and balanced diet
- social interaction, e.g. engaging with friends, family, colleagues, local community
- talking about your grief, e.g. with family, friends, a counsellor or other health professional
- putting yourself first – this is one instance where making yourself a priority is important
- setting aside time just for you
- doing activities that bring you pleasure, e.g. hobbies, music, reading, going to the movies
- asking for help – don't be afraid or ashamed to seek help if you need it.

Rest and Relaxation

Putting time aside to rest and relax should not be seen as an indulgence, but rather as a practicality. Allowing the body and mind to rest renews your energy levels and helps you to be more productive, and better able to get through your day-to-day.

What can I do to relax?

Rest and relaxation is about slowing things down, reducing tension, and allowing both your body and mind to ‘take a break’. What relaxes one person may be completely different for someone else, so it may be helpful for you to identify and list the things that help you to unwind.

Ideas for relaxation may include:

- sleeping
- listening to music
- massage
- meditation
- tai chi
- having a bath
- arts and crafts
- watching a movie
- walking around your garden
- sitting outside
- daydreaming
- reading
- having a cup of tea
- doing something you enjoy.

Things that help me feel rested/relaxed:

Relationships

In many ways, the sustained love and support of family and friends can be very helpful following the loss of a loved one. Grief, however, can also cause great strain on relationships between partners, family and friends.

If your grief is affecting your relationships, it's a good idea to talk to someone about it, whether it is the person involved, a supportive friend/family member or a health professional.

Meaningful relationships

When grieving, your time and energy are precious commodities that are better spent on positive, meaningful relationships, rather than difficult ones.

Ask yourself: *Do my existing relationships create meaning and comfort in my life or are they unhealthy?* If you feel that they are more destructive than supportive, then it may be worthwhile reconsidering the level of this person's involvement in your life at this time.

Supporting Others

The reality of life is that often when we are at our lowest, there may still be others around us that need our support, e.g. children, partners, family, friends, community, ageing parents or even pets. It can be all too easy to overlook our own wellbeing when supporting those around us, so it is important to be aware of our own needs, boundaries and limitations.

Some things to consider

- Put yourself first. Look after yourself, and then support those around you if needed. This is one instance where making yourself a priority is important.
- Support can be a two-way street. Talk to the person/people you are supporting about how you can all help to support each other.
- Consider what you can delegate to others, particularly around day-to-day tasks, e.g. dropping kids at school, walking the dog, cooking dinner.
- Be realistic in your commitments. You're not a superhero, and nobody expects you to be one.
- Try to remember yourself in this picture – you need to be fair to both yourself, and the person who needs your support. Model good self-care to those you are supporting.
- Listen to your body. It is a good indicator of whether you are taking care of yourself.
- Don't ignore or stifle your emotions, e.g. feeling sad, angry, upset. These feelings are normal and natural grief responses and it's OK to experience them.

Significant Occasions

Birthdays, holidays, Christmas, Valentine's Day, anniversaries, the day they died, the day we met... For the bereaved, the list of significant events that can trigger grief responses can be endless.

Other losses experienced after the death of a loved one, whether they be additional bereavements, loss of possessions, relationships, or employment, etc., can also be particularly strong grief triggers.

While our responses will change over time, the sorrow and pain as these occasions come and go can be draining and emotionally exhausting. Indeed the lead up to such events can often feel worse than the day itself. It is important to recognise the impact anniversaries and other significant occasions can have and to take good care of yourself during these times.

Milestones

Milestones, those gained and those missed, can be painful and difficult for those who are grieving. It is normal and natural to feel sadness when milestones occur. When a loved one dies, we don't just grieve the loss of them physically, but also the loss of their dreams, their future, and their presence within our lives.

Milestones may include:

- those relating to the death, e.g. yearly anniversaries
- occasions that the person who died never got to experience, e.g. weddings, graduations, having children/grandchildren, retirement
- personal life transitions or events that you wish they were there for.

Tips for Managing Significant Occasions

Below are a variety of ideas that may help you to better navigate anniversaries, milestones and other significant occasions.

Beforehand

- Look at your diary and make a note of events and milestones that may be difficult for you. Start to think about what you can do during these times to look after yourself.
- Consider spending time with someone who understands the significance of the occasion.
- Think about how to answer certain greetings in advance. For example, when someone wishes you ‘happy holidays’, you may respond with ‘thank you’, ‘I’ll do my best’, or ‘best wishes to you too’.
- Keep a journal in the lead up to, and after, the significant occasion – make note of things that were particularly difficult so that you can better navigate them next time.

On the day

- Free yourself from the expectations of yourself and others, and give yourself permission to ‘not be OK’.
- You might like to come up with rituals to honour and acknowledge your loss, e.g. writing a letter to your loved one, visiting a landmark, or arranging to meet up with friends and family.
- Talk to other people about the memories of your loved one, and ask them about theirs.
- Do something you wouldn’t normally do in memory of your loved one, e.g. make a donation in their name, plant a tree, sign up for a class in something you’ve always wanted to do or volunteer to help a charity.
- Do something that makes you feel good. It may be as simple as reading your favourite magazine, going for a walk, listening to music, getting a massage or enjoying a good cup of coffee.

Telling Your Story

Telling the story of your grief experience can be healing in many ways. For example, it can help you to process the loss, validate your situation and gain perspective around how this affects your life as a whole.

Talking to someone supportive and understanding about your experience can be particularly helpful. By telling your story to the people around you (e.g. family, friends, colleagues) they are often able to be much more understanding of what you are going through, and become better able to identify when and why you need their support. If you don't feel comfortable talking to the people in your life, then it may be helpful for you to see a counsellor or psychologist.

Telling your story verbally is just one way you can share what you are going through. You may also find benefit in telling your story in writing, or through artistic expression, e.g. song, dance, painting.



Remembering

Significant occasions, milestones and other grief triggers often bring back a wide range of memories. Initially these memories may be painful; however, with time, memories that initially upset you, can instead provide comfort.

The love you have for someone does not die just because they have died. Death ends a life, not necessarily a relationship. Remembering can help us to feel close to the person who has died. Below are a range of activities that may help you to establish rituals around remembering.

Rituals and remembering

- Tell your story: talk to family and friends about the person you have lost.
- Create a memorial that has meaning to you.
- Find photographs from throughout their lives, and create an album.
- Explore creative outlets, e.g. poetry, writing, song, dance, painting, art.
- Put together a memory book or scrapbook.
- Buy a bottle of the fragrance they used to wear.
- Talk to them: people often talk to their loved ones after they have passed away. Often we miss being able to converse with them or tell them about our day. Verbalising what we wish we could say to them can provide comfort and help us to remember them.



Resilience

Building resiliency

Resiliency is our capacity to withstand, respond and adapt to stressful or traumatic experiences. The word ‘resilience’ is commonly used in reference to the way people and communities rebuild their lives following a destructive and/or traumatic event. Being resilient doesn’t mean we don’t experience negative emotions such as stress, pain, grief or sadness; but, rather, resiliency is the ability to work through these feelings and begin to rebuild our lives.

It is a myth that we are ‘born resilient’. People have the ability to build on or ‘top up’ their resilience at any time during their lives.

Ways that we can build our resiliency include:

- **Connect:** Creating and maintaining good relationships can help you to feel better supported.
- **Set goals:** Develop some realistic goals that you can work towards. Making a regular effort to edge a little closer to achieving these goals will give you a sense of purpose and accomplishment.
- **Keep things in perspective:** Try to keep things in perspective, especially in times of emotional strain or stress. Try to focus on the bigger picture to avoid blowing things out of proportion.
- **Self-care:** Make the effort to look after yourself both physically and emotionally. This way your body will be better able to deal with stressful situations when they occur.

Social Support Networks

A strong social support network can be particularly helpful in navigating the grief process, both initially and in the long term. Following the loss of a loved one, it can be all too easy to withdraw from social interaction, leading to isolation and feelings of loneliness. Social engagement, however, can go a long way toward reducing these feelings, and can have a big impact on your emotional health and wellbeing.

Taking the first step

Tapping into, building and fostering good support networks doesn't have to be a confronting experience or a big event. It can be as simple as taking a coffee break with a work colleague, making a phone call to a family member, emailing a friend, or having a chat over the fence with a neighbour. If you find engaging socially confronting, start by taking small steps, e.g. 'today I will send a "how are you" text message to a friend'.

People who are part of my support network:

Community

Engaging in your community can provide you with a wide and varied social support network, alongside providing a sense of purpose, belonging and mutual support.

Ideas for engaging in your community might include:

- join a gym, exercise class or sporting club
- go back to school, e.g. short courses, community education
- join a club or other interest-based social organisation
- visit your community health centre or local library
- connect online, e.g. online communities, social networking sites
- volunteer your time with a community service organisation
- check your local paper or notice board for information on how you can become involved in community events, local groups and committees.

Community and ‘place’

When a traumatic event affects a local community there is shared grief and loss, disruption and an adjustment period to process changed physical, social and community life. Restoration and the forming of a new community identity or ‘place’ can take some time. Participation in community roles, activities and new structures, however, can help to restore community, contribute towards individual reconnection to place, and help to support you in your own grieving process.

Community beyond ‘place’

Community isn’t something that is defined purely by geographical location. In this day and age, we can engage in and connect with communities that may be far away from where we live by utilising transport, telecommunications, technology, etc.

Looking Toward the Future

In the immediacy of bereavement, it can be difficult, upsetting and even frightening to think about how the future might now look. When we lose a loved one, especially unexpectedly, we not only grieve them, but also the future we would have had with them. The plans and goals we have previously made are forced to change, and this can be very confronting.

Often people are saddened or feel guilty when they start to construct a future without their loved one in it. The reality is, however, that life does continue. With time, life can find meaning again as we start to rebuild and relearn this changed world around us. Try to keep in mind that looking toward the future doesn't mean that you have forgotten your loved one, or are dishonouring their memory in any way. You will always carry a part of your loved one with you, no matter what the future brings, or how life evolves.



Goals

Goals can provide a renewed sense of direction and purpose. They can also provide us with something to look forward to.

Ideas around setting goals

- Brainstorm. Write down anything and everything you can think of. This will give you something to work with.
- Set a variety of realistic and achievable goals – small, medium and large.
- Try setting some goals around self-care, e.g. physical activity, relaxation, socialising.
- Set tangible goals that are specific and can be measured e.g. ‘my goal is to go on a two-week holiday to the Gold Coast in June’, rather than ‘my goal is to go on a holiday’.
- With bigger, long-term goals, try to make a regular effort to edge a little closer to achieving them.

My Goals Table

Goal	Short or long-term goal?	What do I need to do to achieve my goal?	Timeframe

Seeking Help

It's never too late to seek help

Grief doesn't have a timeline – it's OK to admit you are struggling with your grief, whether it be weeks, months, years or even decades after the death. There is nothing shameful about asking for help. You don't have to tough this one out alone.

Where can I find help?

If you are concerned about the way in which you are grieving, it is important to find out more.

Help can come from a variety of sources, including (but not limited to):

- friends and family
- GP and/or health professionals
- community health services
- counselling or a support group
- telephone helplines, e.g. Lifeline 13 11 14.



Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



*This booklet has been developed by the
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*To access further resources go to
www.grief.org.au*

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