

# Walking Through Grief

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## What is grief?

Grief is the natural and normal human response to loss. Because we were not created for death or injustice, emotional suffering can be caused by separation, loss, change, trauma and/or unmet needs. Grief is a highly individual experience with a timetable that can last from two weeks to two years. It is not a linear process and there is no right or wrong, but there is a healthy way to grieve. Naming the loss, lamenting the loss, learning from the loss, and living with the loss are important parts of the journey of grief.

## What is healthy?

The mourner must feel the loss and feel the pain without numbing or avoiding to move through the grief process. The community must offer permission and their presence to protect this sacred journey and bear witness to the pain.

## Why am I in pain?

Grief is the groan that fills the gap between the promises of God and this present reality. Our suffering is a prophetic cry for the coming Day without death, pain, injustice, disease, or trauma. We weren't created for death.

*"He [God] will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away,"*  
Revelation 21:4

## What should I do?

Each person's grief is highly personal and based on past experiences, coping capacity, personality, faith, and the significance of the loss to that person. There is not a linear path through grief, but the four parts below serve as guide posts to support and normalize the process. Have patience, feel it when it comes, ride the wave without judging it, and direct it to the Lord over and over again.

1. Loss—experiencing the pain
2. Lament—expressing the pain
3. Learn—growing from pain
4. Live—walking alongside pain

*"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,"* Matthew 5:4

*"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me,"* Psalm 23:4

*"Although we may not always feel it, suffering is a place where God is present—a place where He longs for us to meet Him. Suffering is a place we can be made new, a place where wholeness may be found as we experience the full extent of God's love for us,"* Timothy Keller.

# 1. Loss—experiencing pain

There are different types of loss that cause grief. Name and feel the loss. Anger, anxiety, sadness, confusion, disappointment, loneliness, guilt, shock, disbelief, and fatigue are normal responses.

## A. **Actual Loss** (tangible, acknowledged)

- death
- divorce
- health
- financial

## B. **Ambiguous Loss** (unclear, without closure, unacknowledged)

- stigmatized loss: suicide, overdose deaths, affairs, abortion
- non death loss: moving, job loss, loss of relationships, retirement
- natural disasters
- racial injustice
- loss of dreams or purpose
- immigration, loss of culture
- safety, security
- traumas

## C. **Secondary Loss** (losses set in motion by primary loss)

- family structure, shifts in daily patterns
- familiar ways of relating (avoided by others)
- past (shared parts with lost person)
- future (shared plans with lost person immediately cease)
- focus and function (preoccupation with feelings of pain and sadness)
- health (eating, sleeping, physical problems caused by stress and sadness)

## D. **Anticipatory Loss** (threat of loss, grief occurring before actual loss)

- future uncertainty (ie-pandemic)
- terminal illness
- foster care
- barrenness

# 2. Lament—expressing pain

*“Lamenting is the spiritually mature response to sadness and sorrow. Our spiritual aliveness is not found in our ability to suppress our sadness. Our spiritual aliveness is found in our ability to bring it to God. When we lament, our problems don’t magically get fixed, but our lives get spiritually formed,”* Rich Villodas.

Lament is a prayer of pain that allows us to express emotions and negativity so that healing can begin. Suppressed pain is vulnerable to anger, bitterness and offense. The bible gives us this tool to wrestle with God in suffering. His permission to direct raw, unedited, and unresolved pain to Him provides us with a safeguard against offense.

1. Direct the prayer to God.
2. Express your complaint in words, groans, journaling, art, or in another form.
3. Make your petition. What is your request? What kind of help are you asking for?

4. State hope and trust on as it results from his co-regulating presence and comfort. Let all pain and anger out before praising.

In times of crisis, we lose access to the parts of our brain where logic and reasoning are stored. The Spirit bypasses the mind to give access to truth through His ministry of comfort. When we feel heard, seen, understood, validated, and joined in our pain, the gap between our experience and the promise is bridged. We're designed to gain perspective after identifying and releasing overwhelming emotions that cloud our view.

Lament is not unbelief, but a prophetic cry for the coming Kingdom. It is a form of intercession given to people to get through suffering in the safety of His presence to endure these days of injustice and sorrow as we look ahead to the day when there will be no more death, mourning, crying or pain (Revelation 21:4). Tears are only needed for this age.

**Psalms of Individual Lament:** 3, 4, 5, 7, 9-10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 39, 40:12-17, 41-43, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 64, 70, 71, 77, 89, 120, 139, 141, 142

**Psalms of Communal Lament:** 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89, 90, 94, 123, 126, 129

### 3. Learn—growing from pain

Grief exposes belief systems that were under the surface until they were challenged and shaken. The mourner is involuntarily tasked with adapting to a new world after the ground shifts beneath them. Assumptive beliefs might sound like the following:

- It wasn't supposed to be this way.
- I thought she'd always be here.
- I thought I'd react differently.
- I don't deserve this.
- I thought my body would always work properly.

God uses loss to expand our worldview to encompass eternity as the mourner makes meaning out of the beliefs that were shattered. Grief causes people to wrestle with life, death, and one's purpose and meaning.

Resurrection can only be discovered through death. New perspectives can be birthed from the tomb of grief and hope becomes anchored in God's eternal plan for justice. When old belief systems are refined, biblical truths can be integrated with the current suffering, empowering God's people to stand on the Rock that remains unshakable through the fire.

We don't like or seek after pain. However when the pain fades, the encounter with God in the valley of suffering will remain.

*"But rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy," 1 Peter 4:13.*

*"I do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others who do not have hope," 1 Thessalonians 4:13.*

*"He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, He has put eternity into man's heart, yet so he cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to the end," Ecclesiastes 3:11.*

## 4. Live—walking alongside pain

It takes a tremendous amount of energy to reorganizing life and belief systems after loss. Adjustments and major revisions are needed to find a new normal. Thousands of attachment bonds are being untied and retied differently. The journey doesn't end. "Grief is love persevering" and processes throughout the lifespan. The mourner learns to cope and live alongside grief while investing energy back into living.

Grief waves are not regression. It is normal to go back and forth between loss-oriented (past) and restoration-oriented (future) work. Reminders of loss can come with anniversaries, holidays, and other known and unknown triggers. It's OK to go with the flow. An adaptive mindset accepts that feelings come and go. It's helpful to label an upsurge of emotions as a "grief wave." Be reminded that it is temporary like a wave that escalates, peaks, and passes.

I feel sad...for now.

I feel pain...for now.

### **Ministry of Comfort—"The cry of the griever is to be known, not fixed."**

Grief work is not addressing a broken mind. It is a journey requiring comfort and compassion for the brokenhearted. Jesus joined his friends in crying, even though He knew what was coming. "*Jesus wept,*" *John 11:35.*

Healing cannot be forced or hurried. Let pain have its perfect work by resisting the temptation to squelch or resolve it. Conversations about the actual loss experience, as well as remembering the relationship experienced while the person was alive, may bring comfort. Ask questions, allow silence, help them remember, share your memories, invite them to share how life has changed and what they've learned.

**DO**: empathize, listen, cry, show up, provide your presence, normalize, bless

**DON'T**: fix, solve, replace, abandon, minimize, suppress, rush, or deny rights to grieve

**PREPARE**: Evaluate your personal grief journey. You will offer the same comfort you have received. Reflect and invite the Holy Spirit to come near and comfort any hurting places.

- What losses have I experienced?
- How did I receive comfort from Christ? Where do I seek comfort outside of Christ?
- How did my family grieve growing up?

*"We know that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing," James 1:3-4.*

*"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too," 2 Corinthians 1:3-5.*

# Appendix

Lament Tool

Four Emotions Art Sozo Exercise

Painting Loss Art Exercise

Empathetic Statements

## Additional Resources:

- Youtube “Brene Brown on Empathy”
- Adam Young’s Podcast, “The Place We Find Ourselves”—Episodes 16, 17, 18
- Dr. Therese Rando’s “Six R’s of Mourning” theory about 6 tasks of grief