

The page is decorated with numerous small, stylized leaf illustrations scattered across the top and sides. These leaves vary in shape and orientation, some pointing upwards and others downwards, creating a delicate, organic border around the central text.

# Introduction

**PEOPLE TEND TO AVOID** talking about grief and death. Yet, when you're in the midst of grieving, you have all these questions about what's happening, how long it will last, how to cope, and where to turn for help. These questions are hard to ask, but harder still if left unanswered. The answers in this book will help you to deal with something everyone faces, but no one really wants to talk about.

We surveyed over 2,000 people—all of whom experienced the death of someone close. They shared their most pressing questions that they wished they could have had answers to. You likely have many of the same questions.

## **What you'll find in this book**

### ***A framework for understanding your grief***

Because grief touches every aspect of your life, coping with it can be unexpectedly challenging. We encourage you to start by reading “What Is Grief?” (p. ix), where you'll find out what's “normal” in grief and what you can expect in the days ahead. It provides you with a framework to help you understand what's said in the rest of the book.

### ***Insights from grief experts and people's stories***

To help you make sense of your grief, you'll hear advice from counselors, pastors, and other grief experts, as well as heartfelt

insights from people who have been through grief themselves. Many of these experts are featured in the GriefShare grief support group program (see p. 176).

### ***Support from Scripture***

The answers in this book are based on recent bereavement research and what the Bible teaches. We believe the Bible contains practical help for all of life's circumstances. Second Corinthians 1:3 refers to God as "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3). We pray that you will know God's loving, caring presence as you grieve and that you are encouraged by His words in Scripture.

### ***Ideas on how to apply what you've learned***

In every chapter you'll find practical tools and ideas to help you navigate your loss. Look for the sections titled "This might help you," which suggest ways to apply the information to your own situation.

### ***Cross-references for a fuller explanation***

In the "Further reading" sections, you'll find references to other chapters that touch on the same topics. Reading these can enrich your understanding of the situations you're struggling with.

## **Who we are**

*"Is My Grief Normal?"* is written by GriefShare, a grief support group ministry that has been helping grieving people find comfort and guidance for over 25 years. You can learn more about how GriefShare can help you on page 176.

It's our prayer that through this book you get a glimpse of the hope that is possible, even when life is falling apart, because the "God of all comfort" is available to you.



# What Is Grief?

**UNCERTAINTY IS UNNERVING.** When you're not sure what to expect, you don't know how to plan. You feel perpetually unprepared, always "on edge." When someone has been an integral part of the regular rhythms of your life, that person's absence disorients you.

That's what happened after Stacy's mother died. She had already lost her brother, father, and grandmother in the past. Now, without any family to talk to, she felt like she had no confidence about how to move ahead in her life: "I couldn't figure out what I was supposed to do. How was I supposed to navigate by myself?"

Similarly, after many years of marriage, Martha's husband died. She shares, "I've just been surprised by how lost I am."

## Grief disorients every aspect of your life

Grief can be so disorienting that you may wonder, "Am I going crazy?" You're not. The disorientation is normal, because the death of a loved one requires such radical changes in your life. These changes affect every part of life. Here's how other people have described grief's effects:

- **Emotionally:** "In the core of my heart I felt a deep sadness." "Fear consumed me."
- **Mentally:** "There were times I just could not concentrate. I would zone out in the middle of conversations." "I would

forget appointments. A couple of times I forgot to pick up my kids at school on time.”

- **Physically:** “I felt intense pain, like knives stabbing at my chest and my head.” “I felt pain in my abdomen; I couldn’t digest food. I couldn’t sleep.”
- **Relationally:** “When I got back to work, it was like I had the bubonic plague. Nobody would come around me.” “I didn’t hear from a lot of people who had [regularly] called before. People that had been close began to avoid me.”
- **Spiritually:** “When the doctor said they had done all they could, I thought, *How can this be? Where is the answer to prayer? God, where are You?*” “I only knew Him as a loving God, and I thought we were really close. But I felt so far away from Him. And I questioned, *Did He really love me? Did I really love Him?*”

## Grief is a journey

“Grief” refers to the total collection of reactions you experience after a significant loss. Since loss affects so many aspects of life, you’ll need time to process your grief responses and find a way forward. Think of grief as a journey, rather than a one-time event. It’s a journey into uncharted territory, so you won’t always know what you’ll encounter as you proceed. But reading how others have handled the journey helps you understand what is “normal.” You also can get ideas that may help you on your journey.

## Your grief is unique

In many ways, your grief will be like other people’s grief: Sadness, confusion, fear, regrets, and anger are common

responses. But there will be aspects of your grief that are unique to you. That's because a lot of different factors affect a person's grief experience. These factors are related to your relationship with your loved one and to your life history. For example:

- The closeness of your relationship
- The type of death your loved one experienced (and whether it was expected or unexpected)
- Previous experiences with loss in your life
- How you've learned to cope with stress in your life

Because dealing with grief is affected by a number of unique factors, *there cannot be just one way that everyone goes through grief*. Don't assume you must experience exactly what others go through. Grief is too complex for that to be true.

In addition, it's important to be aware that there are some grief responses that aren't as helpful as others. This book is designed to set up "guardrails" for your journey by addressing common questions about grief. The answers provided will help you stay on track, while also alerting you to potholes, ruts, and dead ends along the way.

## This might help you

- **Be cautious about comparing your grief to someone else's.** If someone you know seems to be handling a certain aspect of grief better, you might ask how they're doing it. If they have a helpful insight or suggestion, great. But recognize that what works for them might not work for you.
- **Be cautious about comparing your current grief to past experiences with grief.** This is not only because every relationship is different, but also because *you* are different, in terms of both life experiences and maturity

level. If you accept that each grief experience will have unique elements, you can avoid placing unnecessary and unrealistic expectations on yourself.

## **Section 1**

# The Nature of Grief









# 1

## What do I do now?

**AFTER WALTER'S DAUGHTER WAS STILLBORN**, his wife asked, "What is a mother without a child in her arms supposed to do?" The death of your loved one can be so painful and disorienting that you may feel utterly helpless to know what to do next.

### Do the next thing

When you're exhausted and paralyzed by grief, making decisions and fulfilling responsibilities can feel impossible. It can help to focus only on what is in front of you. Counselor Dr. Edward Welch says:

When you listen to people who have been through bereavement, one thing they'll say is, "Do the next thing." It sounds like fairly shallow counsel. But what they're trying to say is, grief can feel like such a weight that it can immobilize you. And it can feel like once you're immobilized, you will never start again.

Okay, then just do the "next" thing. But what is the next thing? It can be as ordinary as getting a glass of water, brushing your teeth, making a phone call, or vacuuming.

Marie shares her experience: “I remember staggering out of bed and standing there in the bathroom, just staring at myself for about two or three minutes, and then saying, ‘Okay, turn on the taps. Pick up your toothbrush.’ After I would say the instruction, I would do the thing. ... I remember several times when I would start the coffeemaker but not put the water in. I got to the point where I left a list of instructions next to the coffeemaker.”

## **Be proactive**

You may want to just stay in bed, but responsibilities persist. Children need care; your employer needs your skills; family members and friends need your presence. So it is important to try to take intentional steps forward—one small step at a time.

But there will come a time later on your grief journey when you’ll want to be more proactive about working through and processing your grief. Counselor Dr. Zoricelis Davila explains:

I once heard a griever say, “Life pushes you ahead.” And it’s true: Life keeps going and moving whether you’re ready for it or not. It is easier when you take appropriate steps because that prepares you for the new life. This is not to say that person wasn’t significant to you or you didn’t love them—but there has to be a new way of living without him or her. When you take intentional steps in your recovery, you take ownership. The benefit of taking ownership is that you shape that new way of living, and you can try to make it less intense or more bearable for yourself.

If you aren’t proactive at some point in your grief, you are going to experience loss-related emotions, questions, and concerns for a longer period of time, and you will probably experience them more intensely over that time frame. That can

feel debilitating. Even taking small steps in your grief journey gets you moving forward.

### **This might help you**

- When you find yourself paralyzed in a moment, think only of one single action you can take that is right in front of you. And every time you do this “next thing,” it is a step forward on your grief journey.
- It’s also important to remember that being intentional and proactive about taking steps forward in grief doesn’t necessarily mean fulfilling responsibilities all by yourself. Getting help from friends and relatives will be especially valuable early in your grief journey. Their help now can give you strength to take on more for yourself later.

**Further reading:** How do I handle being overwhelmed? (p. 50), How do I respond to “What can I do to help?” (p. 103)

## 2

# When will I feel normal again?

**RIGHT NOW, NOTHING FEELS NORMAL.** Loss has turned your world upside down. Grief brings many unfamiliar emotions and experiences. And not only do you want to know if your feelings are normal, you also wonder if you'll ever feel *any* kind of normal again.

One of grief's challenges is that there's no set formula for how you will, or should, grieve. Even within the same family, people process grief differently. Dr. Brad Hambrick, counselor, says:

When we enter grief, one of the early things we recognize is that we're not sure how to do grief. It feels like there ought to be a "right way" for something this significant. But we might think of grief more like poetry or jazz, in that there's not a right way to do it. You're going to do grief in a way that fits and suits you. Although, there are some common experiences.

Grief affects every part of you—your emotions, body, mind, relationships, and even your faith. And maybe you've read about what you can expect in each of those areas and maybe you've experienced some of those things, or all of them, or none. But one thing is certain, right now you don't feel "normal." In one sense you'll never go back to the "normal" you once knew. That's impossible.

## Finding ways to live with loss

You may be thinking, *Well, I don't want a "new" normal. I just want my loved one back.* That's understandable. Grief doesn't mean trying to forget, and healing doesn't mean replacing the one you've lost. Over time, you'll find new ways to live with your loss—not ways to erase it. Willie, who grieved the death of two wives, explains it this way:

It's like a large hill and you drop down to a low valley. Then you go back up on a hill again and you drop into another valley that's not so low. Then you finally get to your new normal. That's not negating grief, it's just living with grief a lot better.

## How to gauge if you're making progress

You might wonder how long your grief will last. There is no magic number. It is like a journey—but a journey that sometimes feels like being lost in the woods without a flashlight; you wonder if you're moving forward or just wandering in circles.

Thankfully, there are six signs of healing that can help you see where you're making progress. These are not one-time events, but rather signs that the valleys aren't as deep.

- **Accepting the reality of your loss:** Acknowledging that even though you don't want this, you have gone through a major loss that will change your life in significant ways.
- **Dealing with emotions:** Learning how to process and manage the powerful emotions you will likely experience.
- **Adjusting to a world without your loved one:** Being able to say, "You're not here with me now, so I have to identify what adjustments in my daily or weekly routine might need to be made."

- **Addressing questions:** Thinking through questions about ultimate concerns, such as “Why did God allow this to happen?” or “What happens after death?”
- **Continuing without forgetting your loved one:** Taking steps forward with your life, which does not mean forgetting your loved one, but honoring them by building on the blessings from that relationship.
- **Sharing comfort:** Comforting others, which helps you heal even further.

Grief will likely change you; you won't go back to who you were before. Yet, even as grief reshapes your life, God does not leave you alone: “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18).

Author Joni Eareckson Tada gives a helpful analogy:

Once when I was doing a jigsaw puzzle, my sister knocked over the card table and sent the pieces flying. I scrambled to recover them, but they were gone. Maybe you feel as though God has kicked your table, and all the pieces of your life that were so familiar and wonderful are now gone. You're scrambling to make sense of it all, but nothing is familiar anymore. Life will never be the same. That describes me after I broke my neck [and became a quadriplegic]. My friend wisely said, “Joni, you have lost a lot of puzzle pieces in your life, and you should grieve that, but do not try to reconstruct things as they once were.”

## This might help you

Write two short lists: What has changed? What remains the same? Read Hebrews 13:8 and reflect on both lists. How

does the unchanging nature of Jesus speak to your experience? Thank God for what remains and ask Him to help you face what has changed.

**Further reading:** How can I go on? (p. 14), Why do I start feeling better, then get knocked down again? (p. 17), How do I know if I'm "stuck" in grief? (p. 20)