

## COMMON CONCERNS OF GRIEVING SPOUSES:

### *Chapter 1*

## GRAPPLING WITH YOUR GRIEF

The waves of emotion and varied effects of grief may take you by surprise. But be reassured that what you're experiencing is common. Grief is *always* disorienting. Even if you anticipated your spouse's death, the reality of your loss will be unsettling. In this section, you'll find answers to common questions about the wide range of reactions grieving spouses face.

#### **You will learn:**

- How each person's grief experience is unique
- Common physical effects of grief
- Which grief responses to avoid
- The value of occasional "grief breaks"





# SHOULD I BE SURPRISED BY MY GRIEF REACTIONS?

---

*"How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?" Psalm 13:2*

## *The diversity of grief reactions*

You might be alarmed by how your grief is affecting you. It may be lasting longer than you would have thought, and the range and intensity of your reactions is not what you expected. Be reassured your grief responses are normal. Other grieving spouses share their experience:

**Malika:** *"I was surprised by the physical pain."*

**Rob:** *"The extreme anxiety, the fear, and the uneasiness about doing the daily, normal activities took me totally by surprise."*

**Barbara:** *"I was tired constantly. I didn't care if I made dinner, or ate, or whatever."*

**Malika:** *"It was difficult to concentrate. Someone would tell me something, and I would forget it. I would have a to-do list of 10 things and only get one thing done."*

**Randy Alcorn:** *"I thought, Is this dementia setting in? No, it's grief, and it disorients you."*

## *This might help you*

Grief can affect your emotions, your reasoning ability, your motivation, your body. Even if you've lost a loved one before, this death will cause you to experience different, unexpected aspects of grief. And while grief's effects are disorienting and troubling, it's important to know they are also temporary.

# GAUGING YOUR RESPONSES

Sometimes you might be experiencing so many different feelings that it's hard to pinpoint your exact emotions in a given moment. This chart can help. It describes some of the most common grief responses and how to know when they're becoming a problem.

<i>Emotion</i>	<i>Common reaction</i>	<i>What could be a problem</i>
<b>Sadness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Crying</li><li>• Profound awareness of your loved one's absence</li><li>• Little desire for social gatherings or celebrations</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• No breaks in sadness (no happy memories to break the tension)</li><li>• Avoiding people for days</li><li>• Apathy ("I don't care about anything")</li></ul>
<b>Anger</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Upset that your loved one didn't listen to the doctor's advice</li><li>• Annoyed with insensitive people</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Thoughts of harming yourself/others</li><li>• So irritable with people that they don't stop by</li></ul>
<b>Worry/ Anxiety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Jittery or on edge</li><li>• Dreading being alone when difficult circumstances arise</li><li>• Anxious about not meeting people's expectations</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Panic attacks</li><li>• Can't turn off "what ifs," making you feel helpless to cope</li><li>• Avoiding people for days</li></ul>

<i>Emotion</i>	<i>Common reaction</i>	<i>What could be a problem</i>
<b>Guilt</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling bad about celebrating</li> <li>• Feeling like you're letting people down</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fixating on negative thoughts about yourself</li> <li>• Closing yourself off from others' help</li> </ul>
<b>Mental fog</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forgetting invitations to go out</li> <li>• Difficulty making decisions</li> <li>• Occasionally forgetting commitments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relational conflicts</li> <li>• Overcommitting yourself</li> <li>• Bills, appointments, etc., go completely ignored</li> </ul>

Normal grief reactions gradually fade away over several months. However, if yours linger or get worse, talk to a pastor, physician, or Christian counselor.

## Find support

at a GriefShare group

**GRIEFSHARE.ORG**

# HOW DID MY SPOUSE MAKE AN “IMPRINT” ON ME?

*“A man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.” **Genesis 2:24***

## *The influence of intimacy*

Do you wonder why your grief is taking so long to pass? Or why it's so intense? If you do, consider the extent of your spouse's influence on you. Here are some ways your spouse might have influenced you:

- Mannerisms (verbal expressions, gestures, etc.)
- Handling of emotions
- Perspective on parenting
- Being organized (or disorganized!)
- Becoming more (or less) sociable
- Preferences in entertainment (music, TV, movies)
- Being more (or less) prompt to events
- Religious convictions
- Political views
- Handling finances (budgeting, investing, saving, donating)
- \_\_\_\_\_ [fill in other types of influence]

## *This might help you*

Part of human nature is the tendency to be influenced by those we have a close relationship with. The closer the relationship, the greater the influence—because close relationships involve trust and appreciation of the other person. In the Bible, the book of

Genesis refers to marriage as a “one-flesh” relationship, which has to do with the influential intimacy we have with a spouse.

You’ve lost a unique relationship—and what feels like a part of yourself. So don’t try to rush your grief. Expect it to hurt profoundly for a season. As pastor Randy Alcorn shares,

*I wrote one time that Nancy’s homegoing had left a big hole in my life, but that’s the way I would want it to be. Someone asked, “Why would anyone want that?” The answer is that the only way to avoid grief is to avoid love. So the greater your love, the greater your grief. The bigger your love, the bigger the hole when that person is gone. And I would rather live with the big hole than to never have had a love that big. It’s gradually getting smaller, but it will never disappear [completely].*

For now, take time to remember and reminisce about the numerous blessings your spouse brought into your life. You could look at past pictures, videos, letters/notes, social media posts, and memorabilia. Consider recording special memories in a journal or sharing stories with a family member or friend.

## Slow down the chaos

Your thoughts and emotions may be on overload. A guided journal can help you sort your emotions and find joy.



Discover *Reflections* today:  
**GRIEFSHARE.ORG/JOURNAL**

GriefShare®

# HOW HARD SHOULD I WORK AT DEALING WITH MY GRIEF?

---

*"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens ... a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance." Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4*

## *Refueling for your grief journey*

Journaling, looking at pictures of times with your spouse, and making decisions about your spouse's belongings are all important "mile markers" on your grief journey. But they're very taxing, aren't they?

That's why it's wise to take periodic breaks from grief-related activities. These breaks are simply brief diversions that will help "refuel" you for going further on your journey, just like stopping for gas and a meal on a road trip.

## *This might help you*

**Plan something personal you enjoy each day.** Set aside time to read a book or engage in a hobby. Rob found that building scale models was a relaxing distraction from his struggles with grief. Think of activities that easily capture your attention. As these are times for *personal* nurture, plan to do these things alone.

**Plan "mini-vacations" that help you reconnect with life.** You might choose activities you can enjoy by yourself or with others. You could get a massage, go for a drive, spend a night at a bed and breakfast, go to a museum or sporting event, or take a bike ride. Ronett took a martial arts class every week. Malika schedules "pampering days" every few weeks to get her hair and nails done.

# WHAT IF I CAN'T STOP CRYING?

---

*"This is why I weep and my eyes overflow with tears."* **Lamentations 1:16**

## *Understand why you cry*

Crying is a natural response to grief, but *how much* you cry is affected by a number of factors:

- **Temperament:** You might be someone who is simply "wired" to express emotions more easily.
- **Social setting:** How close you are to the people around you will affect how likely you are to cry.
- **Comfort level for crying in public:** What you were taught growing up about the "public display of emotions" will affect how much you cry.
- **Experiences in life:** The different things you've gone through can change how easily you cry now.

There are several potential benefits to crying. For some, crying is like a release valve for stress and emotional pain, and it also alerts others to your struggle, giving them the opportunity to support you.

## *This might help you*

If you feel like crying, know that it's okay—and even beneficial. And if you're uncomfortable crying in public, plan a regular time to cry when you know you'll be alone. If there are others in your household, this might mean excusing yourself to your bedroom or a bathroom to have the private space to let the tears flow.

# IS IT OKAY IF I DON'T CRY?

---

Crying is a common grief response. So, you might wonder if there is a problem if you are not crying much in your grief.

## *Some people don't cry as much as others*

There is no need to be concerned if you are not prone to cry. A lack of tears does not necessarily mean you are less sad than other people who grieve. A number of factors affect how much you cry:

- **Temperament:** You might not be “wired” to cry that easily.
- **Social setting:** You might not be that close to other people around you, which will make it harder to cry.
- **Comfort level for crying in public:** You might have been taught that it's not appropriate to have strong displays of emotion in public.

Not everyone who cries actually feels better afterward. Crying can be a stress reliever for the body, but not everyone processes stress the same way.

## *This might help you*

If you don't feel the urge to cry, that's okay. What's more important than producing tears is coming to terms with the significance of your loss. The exercises in this book will help you do that.



## 6 signs of healing

### *Accepting*

Acknowledging and accepting the changes in your life after loss is a sign of healing (see p. ix).

## WHAT IF I DON'T WANT TO FACE THIS?

---

Some grievors react to their spouse's death with numb shock: no tears, no real identifiable feelings, and a sudden inability to think of what they should do next. This numb shock is especially common with a sudden loss. A problem arises, however, when numb shock evolves into persistent denial.

### *Short-term denial*

Now, "denial" that your spouse died doesn't simply mean "an outright refusal to acknowledge the death." It can be more subtle than that. Darlene describes it well: "Almost every day I would say, 'I can't believe this happened. I'm still waiting for him to come up the walkway into the house. I'm still waiting to hear his voice.'"

Denial isn't always a problem in the short term. However, problems arise when you try to put up "walls" around certain objects or activities in order to avoid needed changes in your life, such as:

- Refusing to talk about the death
- Refusing to change anything in the house associated with your spouse (a closet, workshop, sewing room, etc.)
- Refusing to assume necessary tasks your spouse had done
- Refusing to acknowledge the positive contributions of your spouse to your life (or maximizing the negative contributions)

### *Long-term denial*

Long-term denial is an unwillingness to accept the implications of

your loss. This type of denial prevents you from dealing with life's daily challenges. After her husband's shocking death, Barbara recalls, "I just kept wanting to do the things I knew *he* wanted. Then suddenly I didn't have any more things to do. Around that time, my daughter suggested, 'Mom, I think you need to get a support group. I'm afraid you're going to get stuck.'"

The routines of your life *will* continue: Bills need to be paid; chores and repairs need to be completed; employers expect you to do your job. If you aren't willing to make changes to carry out those routines, you'll experience more consequences. Life will get more complicated, and it will hinder your ability to deal with your grief.

### *This might help you*

Understand that accepting your loss will occur over time. Grief therapist H. Norman Wright explains: "You're relearning your world. You'll want to recognize, 'This is the way I used to be' and 'This is where I'm at at this particular time.'" As you move through this process of accepting your loss, it will be helpful to talk to someone you trust about what you're experiencing—and why you think it's happening. You might say:

1. "I would rather ignore \_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_."
2. "I think \_\_\_\_ will resolve itself because \_\_\_\_."

Talking about the "because \_\_\_\_" (the reason behind your experience) is important *because* it helps you dig deeper to reveal more clearly the fears, inadequacies, frustrations, and questions that are barriers to moving forward in your life; it can also reveal the positive things you are hoping in or for, helping pinpoint areas you'd like to move toward.

For more on the topic of accepting your loss, see:

- "Can I numb my pain?" (p. 19)
- "Am I staying busy to avoid my grief?" (p. 20)

# CAN I NUMB MY PAIN?

---

*"I have the right to do anything,' you say—but not everything is beneficial. ... Not everything is constructive."* **1 Corinthians 10:23**

## *Unhelpful responses to grief*

Your grief can be intense—and it's natural to want relief from the discomfort. However, it's important to avoid behaviors that only distract you from the pain temporarily. For example:

- Alcohol/drugs/sex
- Getting lost in social media/internet/TV
- Overeating
- Workaholism
- Shopping binges

None of these activities will help you in the long run. In fact, they are likely to create more complications.

## *This might help you*

**Check in with yourself.** For two weeks, every time you're tempted toward an unhelpful response to grief, ask yourself:

- What thoughts and feelings are troubling me? (Be specific.)
- What numbing and distracting behaviors am I tempted to engage in?
- What are the pros and cons of continuing these behaviors?
- What productive behaviors could replace the unhelpful behaviors?

**Use your answers to start a conversation.** Talk with a pastor, physician, or other mental health professional about your answers.

# AM I STAYING BUSY TO AVOID MY GRIEF?

---

*"Be still, and know that I am God."* **Psalm 46:10**

## *The allure of busyness*

While some people find it difficult to get motivated to do anything after their spouse dies, others find they can't sit still. If you're this way, be aware of the trap of using busyness to avoid thinking about how your life must change. This kind of busyness is a trap because while it feels good to accomplish tasks, when there's nothing left to do, the emptiness feels suffocating.

## *Recognizing the busyness trap*

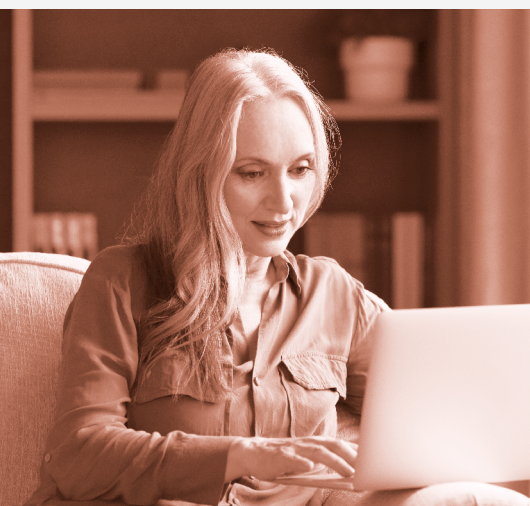
Now, this busyness is *not* the same as the grief breaks described on page 14. Grief breaks are short periods of time in which you focus on activities that don't remind you of your loss. Busyness is a desperate effort to avoid dealing with the reality of your loss.

## *This might help you*

Being caught in the busyness trap isn't always clear. If you're not sure, ask a trusted friend to give you honest feedback. Ask, "How have you seen me dealing with my loss? Have I avoided talking about it? Does it seem like I'm not making needed adjustments?"

It's also helpful to think about Psalm 46:10, where God says, "Be still" (don't fret and run yourself ragged). Instead, "Know I am God." In the rest of this psalm, the writer says God is "almighty." He is a "refuge" or a "fortress" for His people. God is available to take care of His frantic, stressed-out people! If you're not sure how to receive this promise, see "How can I have hope?" (p. 79).

## HELPFUL ADVICE FROM GRIEF EXPERTS & PEOPLE WHO'VE FACED LOSS



### *Watch this video on spousal loss*

To hear from people who have experienced what you're facing is invaluable. This video is filled with compassionate, practical guidance on how to cope with your emotions, find relief, and adjust to the many changes.

*"Watching the video, there's a warmth of relatability."*

**Carla, GriefShare leader**



**Access the video online**

[GRIEFSHARE.ORG/SPOUSELOSSVIDEO](https://griefshare.org/spouselossvideo)