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Grief Has No Timeline: Gentle Ways to Care for Yourself

Dr. Shilpa Jasubhai
Clinical Psychologist.

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***Corresponding author:** Dr. Shilpa Jasubhai, Clinical Psychologist, Ahmedabad, India.

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Abstract

Grief can affect physical well-being, emotions, relationships, and the ability to manage everyday life. This article offers practical self-help tools for people struggling with loss, recognising that grief unfolds differently for each person. It explores naming emotions, using the PAUSE prompts, caring for basic needs, accepting support, and finding comfort through nature, music, creative activities, and meaningful remembrance. Spiritual and cultural practices are also considered as possible sources of support. Readers are encouraged to choose and adapt these approaches according to their needs, without pressure to grieve in a particular way or within a set period. The article also discusses seeking professional help when coping becomes difficult.

Keywords: grief, bereavement, self-care, coping, social support, continuing bonds

Introduction:

Although this article focuses on bereavement, grief can follow many kinds of loss, including the end of a relationship, changes in health, losing a job, or the loss of a hoped-for future. Loss can change how you feel physically, what occupies your mind, how you relate to others, and how you manage everyday life. It may also raise questions about what gives life meaning. Guldin and Leget's (2024) integrated process model brings together the bodily, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual experiences that can accompany loss. You may notice some more than others, and your experience may change over time.

Some days, you may manage the usual tasks. Even when the day has been going well, hearing a familiar song or revisiting a place associated with the person you lost can stir sadness or longing. Caring for yourself does not mean trying to stop grieving or deciding when it should be over. It can mean noticing what might help you live through the day in front of you.

My own experience of grief

I know grief through my work as a psychologist and through my own life. When I lost both my parents within 24 hours, I was devastated. I could not understand what was happening around me. Even as a psychologist, I felt at a loss about what to do.

For a while, I let myself be with my grief. For almost three months, a thought kept repeating in my mind: "I have no one to support me. How will I survive?" Gradually, I became aware of how often I returned to the same fearful thoughts and how they were shaping my days. I started to remember what my parents had taught me, the love they gave me, and the love they shared with each other. This did not take away the loss, but it helped me begin to heal.

Three years later, I lost my nephew, my brother's son. I was extremely close to him. After my parents died, he had been a great source of support for me. He encouraged me to learn music and taught me along the way. Learning music became a special part of the time we shared. Whenever I play, I feel his presence and remember the care and warmth he gave me. Music helps me feel connected to him.

It has been five years since I lost my parents, and grief continues to be a part of my life. I have learned that there is no deadline for grieving and no fixed point by which we must be "finished." These are my experiences, not instructions for anyone else. What helped me may not help another person in the same way. I share them because grief can leave us unsure of how to carry on, and finding our footing again can take time.

Giving yourself time to grieve

Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance are the terms used in the five-stage model of grief. They offer a way to describe certain reactions to loss, but your experience may unfold differently. A feeling may return, several may overlap, or some may never arise. There is no requirement to follow this pattern to grieve or heal (Cleveland Clinic, 2023; Holland, 2024).

Your feelings about the person who died may be difficult to reconcile. You may long for their company while feeling angry about something left unresolved. Knowing their suffering has ended may offer comfort, even as you struggle with their absence. There may also be moments of enjoyment followed by guilt. Having these reactions together does not make your love or your grief any less real.

Try putting your experience into words before deciding how you should feel about it. Rather than settling for "I feel bad," you might recognise loneliness, fear, anger, regret, or several emotions together. Sometimes you may struggle to find a word, and that is okay too. Naming what you feel can give you a clearer sense of what needs attention. You might recognise, "I am thankful they are no longer in pain, but I still wish they were here." Allowing yourself to acknowledge both feelings can help you understand what you need (Smith et al., 2026).

At times, your attention may shift from the loss to everyday activities. You might spend a quiet morning looking through photographs, then prepare a meal, answer a work message, or meet a friend. Stroebe and Schut's (1999) dual process model describes this movement between focusing on the loss and adjusting to life after it. Taking an interest in something else can offer a little breathing space while your connection with the person remains.

Knowing that someone has died does not mean we immediately stop expecting them to be there. You may reach for the phone to tell them something or think of asking their advice before remembering that you cannot. Psychologist Mary-Frances O'Connor describes grieving as a form of learning, as we gradually become familiar with daily life without that person. This takes time. Finding yourself caught in an old habit does not mean you have failed to accept the loss. Over time, you may become more familiar with your reactions and recognise what helps you through them, even when you still feel sadness or longing (Mills, 2022; O'Connor, 2019).

A brief check-in for difficult moments

You do not need to try everything that follows. Begin with one small action that feels manageable today. When it is hard to know what you need, take a moment to notice what is happening now. Feel your feet on the floor and take a comfortable breath. Then ask yourself:

- What feeling is most present right now?
- What feels hardest for me today?
- What could help me get through the next hour?

You may not have an answer straight away. Perhaps you need a glass of water, some quiet, a short walk, or someone to sit with you. This check-in is not meant to push grief aside. It can help you notice one need and respond to it in this moment. If writing helps, you may want to complete the following sentences:

- Right now, I feel...
- One thing I am finding difficult is…
- One small thing I can do for myself today is…

Try the PAUSE steps

If a strong emotion leaves you unsure about what to do next, PAUSE can offer a few prompts. Use whichever steps help you respond to what you need in that moment. There is no need to follow them perfectly.

- **P- Pause:** Take a moment to stop. Breathe naturally and notice your feet resting on the floor.
- **A- Acknowledge:** Find a word for what you are feeling. It might be sadness, longing, anger, fear, numbness, relief, or a mix.
- **U- Understand:** Ask yourself what may have brought this feeling up and what you need right now.
- **S- Support yourself:** Choose a kind response. You could contact someone, rest, write, pray, listen to music, or ask for practical help.
- **E, Empower:** Choose one small next step that feels possible. You can leave bigger decisions for another time.

PAUSE is a way to check in with yourself and decide what might help next. It is not a measure of your coping abilities.

Caring for yourself while grieving

You do not have to appear strong all the time. If you feel like crying, allow yourself to cry. If you do not cry, that does not mean you cared any less. People express grief differently. You might talk with someone you trust, write in a journal, pray, or spend time with a familiar activity. Others may prefer quiet or time alone. Choose what suits you and give yourself permission to stop if something does not help. When words are hard to find, drawing or colouring can be another way to express yourself or occupy your attention. You could doodle, colour a mandala, or create a simple pattern, without needing to finish it or achieve a particular result. Being outdoors might mean sitting in a garden or watching the sky from a window. Music may offer comfort, help you express feelings that are difficult to put into words, and provide a sense of connection with the person you have lost (Merrill et al., 2025).

You do not have to forget someone in order to keep living your life. You might tell a story, look through photographs, cook a familiar dish, keep a meaningful object nearby, or mark an important date in your own way. Some people continue to feel connected to the person who died through memories, routines, stories, or a felt presence. Others may not experience this connection, and feelings can change over time. Research on continuing bonds describes a range of experiences; it does not suggest that everyone should feel connected in the same way (Hewson et al., 2024). Birthdays, holidays, and family gatherings may feel difficult after a loss. Give yourself time to approach these occasions at your own pace, choosing how much you feel able to take part in and allowing your

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needs to change.

When you feel ready, doing something for another person or joining a community activity may help you feel connected. It could be a small favour for a neighbour or supporting a cause that mattered to the person you lost. Consider your energy and circumstances before committing and allow yourself to step back when you need to. Rest is also a form of care. You may need fewer commitments or time away from conversations about the loss, photographs, or gatherings. Allow yourself time to rest without feeling that you must explain or justify it.

Grief can disrupt sleep, reduce appetite, and make it difficult to concentrate or manage ordinary tasks (O'Connor, 2019; Smith et al., 2026). On a difficult day, focus on basic needs, such as drinking water, eating something simple, washing, or getting enough rest. If preparing meals or managing household tasks feels too demanding, ask someone to help. Gentle exercise, such as walking or stretching, can be part of caring for yourself when you feel able. You might also try a few minutes of meditation or gentle yoga, if these suit you (Cleveland Clinic, 2023). Adapt the activity to your energy and physical comfort, without setting demanding goals. A familiar routine may give your day some structure, but it need not be demanding. Begin with one manageable task, such as getting dressed or eating at a regular time. If a significant decision can safely wait, give yourself time to consider it and discuss it with someone you trust. Adjust your expectations to what you can manage that day.

For some people, faith and cultural traditions offer comfort during grief. Prayer, recitation, a family ritual, or reading a sacred text may have a place in your care if they reflect your beliefs. Choose practices that hold meaning for you, without feeling obliged to follow those that do not (Aeschlimann et al., 2024). The Yoga Institute (n.d.) also discusses spiritual practices as a possible source of support after loss.

Accepting support and seeking professional help

People who care about you may want to help but be unsure what would be useful. A specific request can give them some direction. You might ask someone to sit with you, bring a meal, run an errand, or listen while you share a memory (Smith et al., 2026). Being together does not always need to involve talking about the loss. Sharing tea, watching a programme, or sitting quietly may be enough. Let the other person know what you feel comfortable with. You could say, "I would like some company, but only for a little while," or "I am not ready to talk about it today."

Alongside support from family and friends, you may find it helpful to speak with a professional. If coping feels difficult or everyday responsibilities remain hard to manage, consider consulting a grief counsellor, psychologist, doctor, or another qualified professional (Cleveland Clinic, 2023). You can seek help at any point; you do not have to manage everything yourself before reaching out.

Self-help may be useful, but professional support can address difficulties that need more individual attention. Research suggests that structured grief interventions can help some bereaved people, although findings vary (Avis et al., 2025; Johannsen et al., 2019).

Grief does not need to be resolved all at once. For today, caring for yourself might mean accepting help, resting, remembering someone you love, or simply getting through the next hour.

"All that we love deeply becomes a part of us." - Keller, H. (1929)

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