



**Living with Loss  
By Understanding Grief**



*There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power.*

*They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues.*

*They are messengers of overwhelming grief... and unspeakable love.*

*Washington Irving*





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## About this Booklet

This booklet is a complimentary resource from the Tuolumne County Working Group for Loss & Grief Education and Support. The booklet was written in 2008 with input from Working Group Members.

The Working Group was formed in 2006 to promote education in Tuolumne County about Loss and Grief, as well as promoting available County resources for those who have experienced loss.

The Tuolumne County Working Group for Loss & Grief Education and Support consists of members from the following organizations and agencies: Sonora Regional Medical Center; Dawn's Light; Kings View Behavioral Health and Recovery Services; VNA-Hospice; Journey of Hearts website, Tuolumne County Health Department; Tuolumne County Ambulance Service (under contract with the Manteca District Ambulance Service), Cal Fire, local physicians, clergy and many other concerned professionals and businesses.

## Different Types of Loss

*Loss* is a part of life and a part of living. It is defined as the disappearance of something cherished, such as a person, possession or property. There are many different types of losses that can be experienced from the loss of a relationship or job, to the loss of mental faculties or health, or the loss of control over nature or life events to the ultimate loss through death. Some of these losses may trigger a noticeable grief response, others may not.

A loss can also be experienced when a person is diagnosed with a chronic disease or terminal illness or faces a life-threatening situation. People may also undergo procedures or surgeries that can lead to the loss of a limb or breast or the loss of mobility. People may also receive unexpected bad news from medical professionals, law enforcement, military personnel or clergy about the loss of a loved one.

There are also many losses that are not always publicly announced or acknowledged such as a miscarriage, an abortion, the death of a relative by suicide, or the injuries experienced from physical or emotional abuse. Instead of being able to grieve in a public manner, the person endures very private sorrows that can impact his or her health and well being.



## Examples of Loss

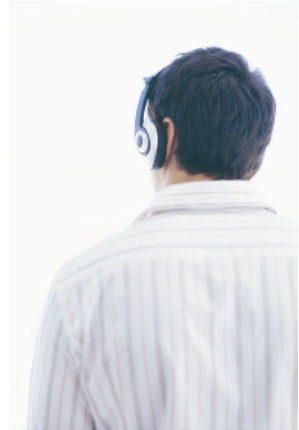
This woman illustrates some of the many types of losses and her coping strategy. This woman...



- is facing the unexpected death of a child.
  - is coping with infertility.
  - has just had a miscarriage.
  - is being abused.
  - has just been diagnosed with ovarian cancer.
  - has realized her long-term relationship is ending.
- is awaiting the death of an ailing loved one.
  - is an exhausted caregiver for an elderly parent.

This man illustrates other types of losses and a different coping strategy. This man...

- has been let go from a job.
- has a child in the intensive care unit of the hospital.
- has just had his partner walk out on him.
- has just had a parent die.
- is living with AIDS.
- has just been diagnosed with testicular cancer.



# Grief - the Normal Response to Loss

*Grief* is the normal response to loss. Grief reactions may be seen in response to physical or tangible losses (a death or property) or in response to other losses (divorce, loss of job, loss of health).

A grieving person may experience normal grief reactions that include physical, behavioral, emotional, social and spiritual responses.

Different body complaints are commonly experienced by a person who is grieving such as:

- Fatigue
- Panic attacks
- Anxiety
- Pain
- Backaches
- Problems sleeping
- Intestinal symptoms
- Chest pressure
- Palpitations
- Stomach pains

Common emotional responses to grief include:

- Anger
- Shock
- Denial
- Despair
- Guilt
- Disbelief
- Confusion
- Sadness
- Sorrow
- Longing
- Yearning
- Depression

These emotional responses often occur in waves. The person may be feeling fine one moment and then depressed, anxious or distressed the next.

## Sudden and Traumatic Loss

A sudden, accidental, or traumatic loss is one that occurs without any warning; it can leave those left behind feeling shaken, uneasy and vulnerable. A sudden event is often a loss or death that does not make any sense. There was no reason for it to happen.

A sudden, accidental or traumatic death shatters the world as one knows it. A sudden loss can leave survivors feeling disoriented, disjointed and disrupted as though split in half by lightning.



Even though the grieving person may recognize that a loss occurred, he or she may not be able to accept the sudden loss either mentally or emotionally. Following an unexpected death, the survivor may feel that the world no longer has order and does not make sense.

The grieving process that results after a traumatic loss is often stronger and more complex than a normal grief response. The survivor struggles to cope with the loss and the aftermath. Shock may overwhelm the survivor's coping abilities, making it impossible to function normally. The survivor of a sudden loss may need additional professional support to manage.

## Children and Grief



Much as we, as parents, grandparents and teachers, might want to protect and shelter children from grief we cannot create a world for our children free from grief and death. For many children the first loss they may experience is the death of a grandparent or a pet.

While we are unable to shelter our children from the sorrows that occur as a part of life, we can teach them how to cope with these losses. According to Mental Health America, teaching a child how to cope with loss is perhaps one of the most important roles an adult can play. You are helping that child develop skills that can last a lifetime.

The following list includes helpful suggestions for ways to help a child cope with loss and death.

1. When talking to a child about a tragedy, find out if what they know or think they know is accurate. Children may be aware of more than you realize.
2. Answer any question simply and honestly, but only offer the details that they can absorb. Do not give the child more information than is asked.

3. Tell the child who is available to listen. When they are ready to talk, take time to listen to them.
4. Let the child have time to grieve, be upset and talk about their fears. Listen, validate their feelings, and provide reassurance with plenty of hugs.
5. Give the child different ways of expressing his or her loss, grief and sadness. It may be verbal, physical, written, artistic or musical.
6. Encourage the child to draw, read, write letters or poetry, sing, tell stories, play with clay, build and other imaginative means of expressing the grief.
7. Let the child go outside to play and be active. This can be a good way to burn off the anxiety they may sense from the adults and feel themselves.
8. Try to keep regular routines. Children can also grieve a change in behavior. They can mourn the environment and the predictability of the schedule that existed before the loss or death.
9. Be patient and be flexible. Children tend to grieve on and off. They may cry one moment and then play normally the next.
10. It may take the child a long time to recover from the loss or the death. How long depends on the child, the type of loss and the relationship with the lost person, pet, object etc. For a child the death of a treasured pet may be more real than the death of a distant grandparent.

# Anger

Anger is a very common emotion when grieving and a normal reaction to the unfairness of loss. It may occur later once the initial shock and numbness are gone. Becoming angry means the grieving person is moving through the grief process. Thoughts that may have been too difficult to handle immediately following the loss may bubble up to the surface as anger.



Anger is another way of expressing the intense pain of the loss. It can be very difficult for a grieving person to keep going through his or her daily life when in the throws of grief, depression and despair; anger is one way to cope that allows the grieving person to keep functioning.

Anger may be directed toward a variety of people including the person who is no longer there, the doctors who provided care, the person grieving and even God. Many times anger is not logical and the reasons for being angry sometimes do not make sense.

Anger that is not channeled in a conscious manner can surface in many other ways. In addition to coming out as rants, raves and rage, anger may also emerge as silence, negativity, resentment, bitterness or sarcasm.

Anger may also surface as losing one's temper, flying off the handle or exploding over something trivial. Understandably these types of intense angry reactions may isolate the grieving person from family and friends when they are needed the most.

Expressing one's anger may be more natural and accepted for men than for women. Grief and Loss expert Tom Golden notes that men and women handle anger in grief differently in his book *Swallowed by a Snake: The Gift of the Masculine Side of Healing*. Men may be moved to tears while expressing their anger and women may discover anger in their tears.

Finding healthy, constructive ways of coping with anger can help in managing the strong, intense emotion.



Some suggestions for dealing with anger include: screaming into a pillow, finding a solitary place to let it out, telling a counselor about the anger, exercising or doing other physical activity that does not result in harm; these are all healthy ways to express anger.

Talking to friends or family may also be helpful as long as one is careful to not hurt them in the process.

## Anticipatory Grief

*Anticipatory grief* is the grief experience that takes place prior to a significant loss that is expected to occur. The term is most often used with dying people and their loved ones. Others may also experience anticipatory grief over their losses such as being let go from a job, having an empty nest or losing a body part.



Anticipatory grief can give us more time to slowly adjust to the reality of an upcoming loss. This time may also be used for dealing with unresolved business such as making a will, mending fences and saying “Good-Bye.”

Anticipatory grief may include depression, extreme concern for the expected loss, preparing for the loss, and adjusting to changes anticipated by the loss.

Friends and family may experience anticipatory grief, grieving before the loss, but will still grieve again after the loss is final. Even with time to adjust beforehand, coping with the loss of a loved one after a chronic, prolonged or long term illness can still be challenging for the family members and friends.



## Faith and Emotions

Any loss can challenge a survivor's religious and spiritual beliefs. Sudden and traumatic losses, in particular, often cause a spiritual crisis. The survivor may start to question their belief system and may even become angry with God. Their emotions are not a denial of faith; they are just feelings about the situation.



Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler offered this advice about Grief and God in their book, *On Grief and Grieving*. “Today, most churches and clergy understand it is not unusual for people to feel anger toward God. Many churches have started bereavement groups in which priests and ministers encourage expression of all feelings.” They advise talking with your clergy or spiritual leader about the anger.

For many people, their faith in God or another higher power can help them cope with their loss. Many get a great deal of spiritual support from their religious community. Most religions have specific activities, rituals, customs and traditions that are practiced during a time of loss to comfort and provide some perspective about the loss for family and friends.

# Holidays and Anniversaries

Holidays and anniversaries are often painful, difficult times for those separated from their loved ones by death, other circumstances or distance.



There are several strategies that can help make it easier to manage the holidays and anniversary dates.

1. Take time for yourself.
2. Determine your priorities and establish realistic goals for the holidays.
3. Delegate some responsibilities to others.
4. Minimize financial stressors by setting a budget and sticking to it.
5. Be around supportive people.
6. Volunteer and help someone else.
7. Create a new holiday or anniversary tradition.
8. Find a new place or a new way to celebrate.
9. Limit your exposure to news reports about the anniversaries of tragic events, especially if you find yourself becoming more anxious, sad or distressed by watching the news coverage.
10. Try to focus on positive memories shared with your loved one rather than on the loss.



*G*od didn't promise days without pain,  
laughter without sorrow or  
sun without rain.

*B*ut God did promise strength for the day  
comfort for the tears  
and light for the way.

*Unknown Author*

## Caring for Yourself after a Loss

During the first few hours, days and weeks following a major loss it is helpful to just focus on the basics.

- **Take it one hour at a time**, one day at a time. If needed, take it moment by moment.
- **Try to maintain some type of a normal routine** or develop a new normal one.
- **Get enough sleep** or at least enough rest.
- **Participate in regular exercise**. Exercise relieves stress and tension. Even walking helps.
- **Eat a balanced diet**. Limit high calorie and junk food. Drink plenty of water.
- **Avoid using alcohol, medications or other drugs** in excess or to mask the pain.
- **Be with the people and do the things that comfort and recharge you**.
- **Talk to friends, family, counselors, clergy and others**. Those who have lived through and survived similar experiences can offer valuable insights.
- **Find ways to express the intense emotions**. Paint, photograph, draw, write, knit, quilt or make a collage or build something like a memorial or garden.
- **Remember coping skills you have used to survive prior life challenges**. Draw upon those inner strengths again for this current challenge.

## Suggestions for Coping with Loss

- **Give yourself permission to grieve.** It is important to work through the difficult emotions and feel the loss. An ungrieved loss remains a part of daily life.
- **Talking about your emotions can help some grieving people work through them.** Talk with trusted friends, parents, family, grief or school counselors, health professionals or spiritual leaders.
- **Limit news exposure for news-making losses.** Keep up with the news reports as new information becomes available, but take breaks from intense coverage for periods of time. It may be necessary to avoid media coverage all together. Reliving the event again and again in the media can hinder a survivor's ability to cope with the loss.
- **Draw strength from spiritual or religious beliefs, traditions and community.**
- **Attend or organize memorial or funeral services.**
- **Avoid making any major life-changing decisions.** The time following a loss, death or life-changing event is generally not a good one to be making any major changes, since a grieving person may not be thinking clearly. Wait at least several months.
- **Seek professional support, if the emotions remain strong** or you experience thoughts of harming yourself or if your thoughts are out of control or are causing disabling depression or anxiety.

## Helping Others Who Have Experienced a Loss

If someone you care about has lived through a loss, there are several things you can do to help them get through the grieving process.

Mental Health America offers the following suggestions for helping others who are grieving.

- **Share the sorrow.** Allow the grieving person to talk about their thoughts and feelings of loss.
- **Don't offer false comfort.** It does not help the grieving person when you say "it was for the best" or "you'll get over it in time." Instead, offer a simple expression of sorrow and take time to listen.
- **Offer practical help.** Baby-sitting, cooking and running errands are all ways to help someone who is in the midst of grieving.
- **Be patient.** Remember that it can take a grieving person a long time to recover from a major loss. Make yourself available to talk.
- **Encourage professional help when necessary.** Do not hesitate to recommend professional help when you feel a grieving person is experiencing too much pain to cope alone.

## When to Seek More Support

Most people are able to cope with a major loss; however there are other times when a grieving person might need to seek additional help.



Someone who shows or experiences any of the following should seek more support:

- Prolonged agitation or anxiety
- Depression or extreme hopelessness
- Unable to do daily activities or job
- Extreme physiologic or psychological reactions
- Prolonged, inhibited or absent grieving
- Extreme guilt
- Suicidal thoughts or ideas
- Abuse or overuse of alcohol or drugs
- Distortion of reality
- Uncontrolled anger

Supportive resources include: physicians, nurses, healthcare professionals, clergy, grief and school counselors, therapists, support groups, mental health professionals, Internet sites, online groups & forums with others who have experienced loss.

## Signs of Recovery

Certified Death Educator, Helen Fitzgerald with the American Hospice Foundation offers her advice on how to realize you are getting better.

- You can review both pleasant and unpleasant memories and you look for people to share memories with.
- You are less sensitive to some of the comments people make. You realize that painful comments made by family or friends are made in ignorance.
- Some time passes in which you have not thought of your loved one.
- You can enjoy a good joke and have a good laugh without feeling guilty.
- Your eating, sleeping, and exercise patterns return to what they were beforehand.
- You no longer feel tired all the time.
- You have developed a routine or a new schedule in your daily life that does not include your loved one.
- You can find something to be thankful for. You always knew there were good things going on in your life.
- You can reach out to help someone else in a similar situation. It is healing to be able to use your experience to help others.
- You acknowledge your new life and even discover personal growth from experiencing grief.



## Integrating and Living with the Loss

*We do not get over grief.  
But over time, we do learn to live  
with the loss.  
We learn to live a different life...  
with our loss.*



Kenneth J. Doka

A grieving person may never "get over" their grief. They may never let go of certain major losses—diagnosis of a terminal illness or the loss of a child, spouse or loved one to death. This loss is forever. The sorrow will endure as long as the survivor is alive.

The grieving process involves learning to adapt and adjust to a life changed by loss. The loss becomes integrated into a new life, a life that can change in many different ways. This may involve developing new skills, finding a new circle of friends, moving, changing jobs, giving up activities and taking on new roles and responsibilities.

In the grieving process, the grieving person learns how to deal with the loss, crisis or significant change, and then how to live a new life. Despite the loss, life goes on, it moves forward and begins anew, but it is a very different life. The survivor is forever changed by loss.

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The back cover image of Lake Melones comes from Dr. Kirsti A. Dyer's personal collection of Tuolumne County Photographs.



# Contributors to the Working Group for Loss & Grief Education and Support

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- VNA-Hospice







Lake Melones. © Kirsti A. Dyer MD, MS

*Earth has no sorrow  
that earth cannot heal.*

*John Muir*

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