# A Guide to Moving Forward as You Grieve

Losing a close friend or family member can be devastating. All the small details of daily life — getting out of bed, making meals, going to appointments, taking care of children, handling responsibilities at work — may seem monumentally hard or inconsequential. It is important for people to let the nonessentials slide and focus on ways to get through this difficult time.

Dr. Michael Hirsch, a psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital and medical editor of Harvard Medical School's Special Health Report Coping with Grief and Loss: A Guide to Healing, offers the following advice. Although some tips may seem basic, they are vital for enabling people who are grieving to work through the process.

## Tend to the essentials

People who are grieving a loved one's loss may neglect their own health and well-being. In spite of the emotional pain, it's important that you attend to the basics — making the literal, eat-your-vegetables choices — to maintain your physical health.

***Eat well.*** A well-balanced diet is essential as you withstand the stress of grieving. That means eating plenty of vegetables, fruits, and lean proteins, and drinking plenty of water and other healthy liquids. If your appetite is diminished, try eating small portions more frequently. A daily multivitamin can cover any missing nutrients.

***Take necessary medications.*** Grief makes people more vulnerable to illness, so it's important that you keep taking your regular medications.

***Get enough sleep.*** Grief is exhausting. If you feel tired, nap to make up for a sleep deficit. Paradoxically, doing more exercise is likely to improve your energy. Watch your caffeine and alcohol intake, as these substances can interfere with sleep.

***Exercise every day.*** A simple walk, a bike ride, yoga, or a harder workout can ease agitation, anger, and depression. Depending on your needs, exercise can provide you with a distraction when you need a break from grieving, or offer you some quiet time to focus on your loss.

***Avoid risky behavior.*** In the wake of a profound loss, people often justify using dangerous coping strategies — such as drinking too much alcohol (more than one drink a day for women or two for men), using drugs, or engaging in impulsive or self-destructive behavior. The short-term relief of pain is likely not to be worth it if the pattern of dangerous behavior persists or intensifies, leading to further losses.

***Delay big decisions.*** Grief can cloud thought processes, and people who make abrupt decisions may regret them later. Many experts suggest that you wait a year, if possible, before moving, changing jobs, clearing out keepsakes, and making other momentous decisions.

***Practice self-care.*** People who are grieving should regularly ask, "What would help me most today?" The answer may vary from day to day and even from hour to hour. Sometimes you need to cry, or talk to a friend, or just take a break from grieving.

## Turn to family and friends

Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt, a grief counselor and author of Healing Your Grieving Heart, suggests that people who are grieving identify three friends or family members who can provide support on a regular basis in the first weeks and months after a loss. Perhaps they have practical help to offer (such as cooking meals), or are not judgmental and willing to listen. The following tips may also be helpful.

***Tell people what helps.*** People who are grieving may need to say, "I just need to cry right now," or "There's nothing you can do to fix this. It would help if you just stay with me for an hour." If you want to talk about the person you've lost, you may need to let others know. For example, it might help if you say, "I miss her so much. I just want to talk about her, but I feel like everyone is afraid to say her name."

***Embrace mixed feelings.*** It is entirely normal to have mixed emotions about the loss and about your loved one. It helps to express these so that other people understand what you are going through. Some of the things you can say:

* "I feel so angry about his death. It seems so useless."
* "I'm relieved that Mom isn't suffering anymore, but I miss her terribly."
* "My relationship with my dad was really difficult. I'm feeling a lot of things right now — not just sadness."
* "I know you think I should be over this, but I'm not."

***Take away uncertainty.*** Often, people aren't sure how to act around you when you are grieving. Although it may be difficult for you to express what you need while you are grieving a loss, the following directions might help others understand how they can support you:

* "If you really want to help, clearing up the kitchen or vacuuming would be great."
* "Hugs just make me feel worse right now. What I need is a little time alone."
* "I can't bear to be alone tonight, but I don't want to talk. Could you stay and just watch TV with me?"
* "I feel so mad about everything. I'm irritated with people all the time."

***Find others who understand.*** People who have also lost a loved one may be more understanding. Ask them outright: "What helped you? How did you get through this awful time?" When friends and family can't help in these ways, support groups often can.

***Leave the door open.*** People who are grieving sometimes may wish that everyone else would just go away and leave them alone to sort through their feelings. If you express this need too forcefully, though, you may drive people so far away that they are not going to be there when you do need them. Here are some ways of expressing the need for solitude while leaving the door open to future support:

* "I just want to go home and go to bed right now. Would you call me tomorrow, though?"
* "I feel so upset these days, I can't settle on anything. Please don't take it personally."
* "I'm just not up to that right now. Maybe in a few weeks. Will you try me again?"

***Realize that everyone grieves differently.*** People who experience the same loss often grieve in different ways. For example, one parent who loses a child may need to cry and talk frequently, while the other might work incessantly and act increasingly distant. Both are trying desperately to deal with their pain and loss. Professional insight from a grief counselor can be valuable when grieving drives a wedge between you and your spouse, family members, or other loved ones.

## Commemorating a loved one

Remembering and honoring the person who died helps people keep memories alive. Sometimes it helps shape meaning from loss. You can commemorate a loved one in various ways.

***Artwork.*** Creating art can help you explore your feelings, chronicle the life of the person who died, or express your ideas of an afterlife. For example, you can create a memory quilt incorporating meaningful scenes and fabrics. Children struggling with grief may find creating art — whether it's with clay, colored pens, paints, or collage supplies — particularly helpful.

***Journal.*** Some people create a journal to memorialize a loved one's life. You can also develop a timeline of important dates and events. The journal can include pictures, stories, sayings, and well-loved recipes. Friends and family may want to contribute as well.

***Memory box.*** You can use pictures, objects, and art supplies to make a memory box for display or keepsakes. When you are ready to go through your loved one's belongings, you can set aside items for the memory box.

***Slide show.*** You can use favorite pictures, songs, and sayings to create a poignant multimedia remembrance of your loved one's life. Or splice old videos together and copy them onto DVDs for others to enjoy.

***Photo wall.*** You can create a collage or remembrance wall from photos taken at different times and events.

***Good cause.*** Sometimes people leave instructions about how they want to be remembered through memorial gifts to various causes, such as medical research, peace efforts, and scholarship funds. If not, you can think about how best to honor your loved one.

***Peaceful spot.*** A peaceful nook with a comfortable chair, lighting, photos, inspirational books, or other important objects can serve as a spot to honor your loved one. Some people create serene outdoor spots, such as a fountain in a garden. Or you could walk regularly through a nature preserve, or visit a spot your loved one enjoyed.

***Garden.*** Planting a garden or a tree can be a wonderful way to remember someone.

***Gravesite.*** In many cultures, the gravesite is a focal point for commemorating the loved one, particularly on special days such as birthdays, anniversaries, or holy days. You can plant flowers there, say a prayer, or simply visit for a few moments of contemplation.

***Prayer.*** Spirituality is of great comfort to many people. Depending on your own views, spiritual practices can include saying prayers, lighting incense or a candle, creating a shrine, or meditating.

***Echo.*** You can create an "echo" of your loved one, by doing something silly, pleasurable, or solemn that they once did. This might involve giving a holiday toast, traveling, playing well-loved music, cracking a bad joke, or performing acts of kindness.

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