

# LEARNING ABOUT GRIEF: COMMON THEMES

Grief can often feel like you are lost at sea, in a raft with holes, without a compass. Grief is disorienting and can be an isolating experience, particularly for bereaved parents and caregivers. While grief is as unique as each individual, there are many themes that families may experience.

## Theme 1: There's no 'right' or 'wrong' way to grieve.

*"Each person's grief is as unique as their fingerprint. But what everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed."* -David Kessler, Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief

Families often wonder whether they're grieving in the right ways, or if not experiencing certain emotions means they have 'failed' in their grief. Grief is an individual process where feelings change over time.

## Theme 2: There's no timeline for grief.

*"People tend to think that grief shrinks over time, when what really happens is that we grow around grief."* -Dr. Lois Tonkin, Growing Around Grief: Another way of looking at grief and recovery (1996)

We wish there were a prescribed 'end point' to the pain that you're experiencing following the loss of your child. What we know about grief is that it morphs over time, eventually becoming part of your daily life. While the grief will always be in your heart, families often experience an integration of it, over time.

**Tonkin's Model of Grief**  
growing around grief



## Theme 3: The 'five stages of grief' is a model that doesn't accurately define most parents' experience.

*"Grief isn't something you get over. It's something you go through."* -Alan Pedenen

Grief isn't linear and does not occur in neatly defined, sequential stages. Families often experience many emotions at one time, or swing between different feelings depending on the moment. The stages defined in this model (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) are only some of the emotions you may experience in your grief journey.

## Theme 4: Different family members, including spouses, will experience grief on their own trajectory.

*"For everyone else the world continued spinning, but for us, our world remains tilted."* -Bereaved parent

Grief can affect parents, siblings, grandparents and other family members at different times. While one parent may be experiencing more yearning emotions, the other may be hope-oriented. These differences can feel confusing, and communication around your individual emotional experiences can be helpful. Both feelings are equally valid and expected processes in grief.

## Theme 5: Leaning into grief and 'turning toward' your loss promotes long-term coping.

*"Our emotions move in us, move through us and move between us. And when we allow them to move freely, they change, perhaps scarcely and perhaps gradually— but inevitably."* -Joanne Cacciatore, PhD

Coping with the pain of losing a child is a lifelong process. Allowing yourself to experience the fullness of your grief, at your pace, provides your mind and heart the space to begin integrating your grief.

# NAVIGATING GRIEF: BODY, MIND, HEART AND SPIRIT

Grief destabilizes our physical bodies, mind, spirit and, of course — our hearts. The range of emotional experiences in grief also affects our bodies, which connects to our minds, and can sometimes change our social circle. You may be experiencing some or all of the common reactions to grief listed below. You may not have felt some of these reactions, and that's OK, too.

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## Physical Reactions

- Changing levels of activity
- Difficulty sleeping (or sleeping all the time)
- Headaches, stomach aches
- Chest pain and/or heart palpitations
- Appetite fluctuations and/or nausea

We recommend visiting with your primary care doctor to support physical symptoms of grief.

## Emotional Reactions

- Deep sadness and yearning for your child
- Anger, frustration, irritation
- Sudden grief bursts and 'waves'
- Powerlessness and helplessness
- Loneliness and numbness
- Anxiety, panic attacks
- Guilt and shame
- Mood swings and fluctuations

Some parents may experience a desire to join their child in death rather than continue through the pain of losing a child. Others may turn to substances, such as drugs or alcohol. This is a common, and often frightening, emotional experience for many parents and caregivers.

**If you have thoughts of self-harm, substance misuse and/or suicide, call the 988 mental health crisis lifeline for support or 911 if you're in immediate danger.**

## Social Reactions

- Pulling away from friends or family (isolation)
- Increased sensitivity
- Changes (or disruptions) in social relationships with family, friends or work

Your desire to socialize with your community or other bereaved parents will fluctuate over time. Give yourself grace as your social needs change throughout your grief.

## Spiritual or Existential Reactions

- Dreams, signs or other mystical experiences
- Distress around not having dreams or seeing signs
- Challenges of faith
- Questions such as 'Why me? Why my child?'
- Finding yourself 'looking' for your child

Existential questions and changes in faith (if you are spiritual) are tremendously challenging. While there are no answers for many of these questions, it can feel therapeutic to voice them aloud with a trusted loved one, counselor or member of your faith community.