

Grief Self-Help Guide

SECTION 1: WHAT IS IT

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section One

Grief is the term used to describe our natural responses to the loss of someone or something we care about.

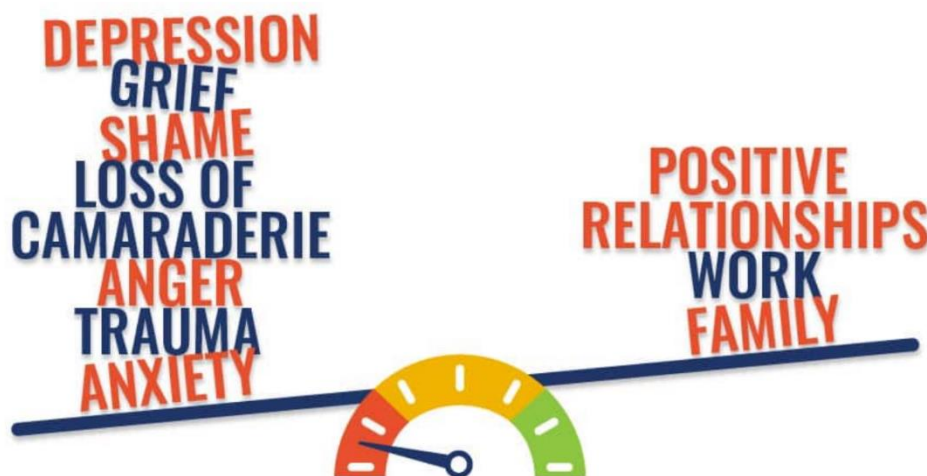
Grief can affect people differently, and how we make sense of and adjust to a significant loss is a very individual process. However, there are some aspects of grief that appear to be common experiences to most. In the main, grief begins to soften with the passage of time, provided feelings are attended to and the loss is accepted.

However, for some the impact of loss and grief becomes debilitating and does not improve over time. This is commonly due to the circumstances of the loss (e.g. traumatic), the presence of multiple losses within a short period of time, struggles accepting the loss, or difficulty with emotions such as guilt and shame.



You might be noticing some of the following:

- Feelings of sadness, guilt or anger
- Repetitive thoughts about the loss – for example, images of the person, the sound of their voice or even the sense of them being there from time to time
- Avoidance of any reminder of the loss
- Numbness or detachment



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There is no right way to grieve

Everyone grieves differently depending on a host of factors, including family, or social culture, religious faith and spiritual beliefs.

If you can attend to your feelings, take care of yourself, and seek support, you can move toward acceptance and healing.

The grieving process is not consistent or linear; it can change daily or from moment to moment.

The emotions of grief can come like waves of different sizes and strengths; one day might be good, the next overwhelming.

It will gradually become less but even years later can be triggered by anniversaries, a piece of music, a smell or some other reminder of what was lost.



If grief continues to significantly impact on your quality of life several years after the event, it may be there are factors preventing you from fully processing the loss, in which case you may want to consider professional support.

Why might veterans struggle with grief?

Military training teaches you to be ready for action, prepared for every eventuality and to plan for the worst. But loss is something you can't prepare for. With no orders on how to deal with loss and grief, it can feel very lonely and overwhelming.

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Military culture promotes acts of selflessness for the protection of others in serving their country and fighting against wrongdoing. But when you're unable to protect your military buddies or others you care for it can leave you feeling helpless.

Many veterans would sacrifice themselves to protect the lives of others, particularly their military buddies. Surviving where others have not can therefore be difficult to come to terms with.

It's not uncommon to feel guilty or somehow responsible, often unfairly.

There is a greater risk that military losses occur in traumatic circumstances, which can make grieving a loss particularly complex and difficult. Many veterans who are grieving lost comrades also have PTSD. Processing the grief can therefore be blocked by the way the memory of the event was captured at the time, and frequent intrusions or flashbacks to the event now.

All emotions are heightened when grieving. There may be some emotions that you are not used to feeling or don't recognise. Emotions are not readily talked about in the military meaning that talking about grief can be particularly tough. This can lead to veterans coping by burying their feelings or numbing them with drink or drugs, making it impossible for the loss to be fully processed.

Feelings of loss can also happen when you leave the military. Commonly, losing the military family, the sense of companionship and comradeship can all bring about a loss of identity and similar feelings to grief – particularly for those who have left under difficult circumstances.

Before you move on, take a moment to reflect on what you have read so far. Note what relates to you personally.

SECTION 2: HOW DOES GRIEF AFFECT YOU?

It will take ~5 minutes to work through Section Two

Grief affects people in a number of ways.

Grief can affect us all in different ways. Try out this exercise to see how grief might be affecting you:

- **Take a piece of paper and draw a simple outline of a figure to represent yourself.**
- **Allow yourself some time, the exercise doesn't have to be rushed.**

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- Notice how your body is feeling as you think about your loss (e.g. empty, heavy, tense?) and add lines/shapes/colours in the relevant locations on the drawing to capture these sensations.
- Notice your emotions. They might be familiar or new to you. Capture them through words, colours or symbols on your drawing.
- Be kind to yourself as you acknowledge these emotions and sensations.
- Your image is a visual record for you to use as part of your healing process.
- As you read on, you might recognise yourself in some of the content.

Grief can be seen in what we do, how we think and how we feel. Think about how each of these areas relates to your experience:



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The Thinking Part

When we are grieving our thoughts might be different to normal. We might make assumptions or jump to conclusions more quickly. The part of your thinking that was once clear in a crisis, might now feel foggy.

Some common thinking patterns during grief include:

- Disbelief - 'This didn't happen'
- Intense focus on the loss, things you feel you should have said or done
- Wishing you had died instead, blaming yourself for what happened
- Question whether life has meaning or purpose
- Increased preoccupation with your own or loved one's mortality and safety

The Feeling Part

Grief can bring about a whole range of different feelings. You might notice some of these, all of these or maybe some different ones too. There is no 'correct' way to feel when we lose someone so it's important to remember that how you feel is real to you.

Some of the common feelings related to grief include:

- Sadness
- Anger
- Panic
- Sensing the presence of the lost person
- Persistent longing or pining for the deceased

The Doing Part

If you are grieving you might have noticed that you are doing things differently. Grief can change how we behave.

You might notice yourself:

- Avoiding reminders of what or who has been lost
- Talking to the person who has passed
- Withdrawing from activities and social opportunities
- Drinking or using substances to numb the pain.

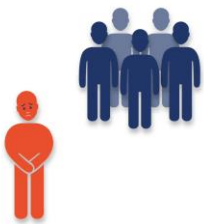
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Myth Busting



“Time heals”

Time alone does not heal. What we do over time is what helps us to heal. This may mean talking to others or seeking help.



“Grieve alone, give them space, leave them alone”

Some veterans will have learned that emotions (especially sad feelings) should be hidden or experienced alone. This was more than likely reinforced in the military and as a veteran can be a hard habit to break.



“Be strong and man up”

Veterans will be more than familiar with this phrase. Whilst "putting on a brave face" might seem helpful, in the long run this can lead to a bottling up of emotions and more difficulties in the future.

SECTION 3: WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT GRIEF?

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Three

You will find below some helpful strategies to get you started. The most important thing is to give each one of these a try and remain open to testing new things out.

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We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.

The recommended strategies include:

- Listen to your body - What your body needs
- Get your thinking straight - The thinking part
- Get Active - The doing part

To begin, read the rest of this section 'What your body needs' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Four: Get your thinking straight.

What your body needs



Express how you feel

Bottled up emotions cause emotional and sometimes physical pain.

Give yourself permission to feel and express your emotions safely.



Increase oxytocin

Oxytocin is a soothing hormone. It is produced when we feel physically and/or emotionally connected to others. Being connected with others at times of grief, holding one another and sharing our pain increases oxytocin. Sharing how you are feeling with someone else can help you to heal. Try picking up the phone, sending an email or meeting up with someone and connect with them.

Similar comfort can be felt from sharing memories and recalling the good times shared. Listen to music you've enjoyed together, look through photographs and remind yourself of the happiness you've shared. This can also be painful to begin with but remember that each tear allows you to take another step forward.

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Increase serotonin

Serotonin is the body's natural mood stabiliser. Increasing serotonin improves our mood. It's a good idea to keep your serotonin levels up during times of grief. Here are a few ideas how:

- Meditation
- Jogging and other light cardio exercise
- Being outdoors in natural sunlight
- Walking in nature

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

SECTION 4: THE THINKING PART?

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Four

Veterans are incredibly positive in the belief that if they stick to their drills and training the 6 Ps, then they'll succeed. Try out the following skills and drills and stick with them until you find one that works for you.

We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.

The recommended strategies include:

- What your body needs (Listen to your body)
- Get your thinking straight
- The doing part (Get Active)

To begin, read the rest of this section 'Get your thinking straight' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Five: Get active

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Collect Your Thoughts

Write

When we lose someone our thoughts can become consumed by memories of them. We might find ourselves imagining that they are there with us or wishing that they were.

For veterans who have lost buddies in traumatic circumstances, or who feel guilty or in some way responsible, these moments can be particularly vivid and distressing.



Try writing your thoughts down. It can be helpful to write a letter to the person. It is important to include fond memories as well as telling them how you feel.

Remember, it is ok to feel how you feel, even if you feel angry with them. You do not choose to feel how you feel, and no matter what your feelings are, it does not mean that you care for them any less.

You might want to do something memorable with this once you have written it, such as setting it free on the wind from the top of a mountain or shredding it into pieces into the sea. Whatever feels right for you to say goodbye and honour your loss.

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

SECTION 5: DO WHAT MATTERS

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Four

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The recommended strategies include:

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- Listen to your body - What your body needs
- Get your thinking straight - The thinking part
- Get Active - The doing part

To begin, read the rest of this section 'Get active' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Six.

Creative ways to 'let go'

There is great value in creative activities and being in nature. Creative activities can be a way to channel how you feel and create something that expresses what you want to say.

For some, making, planting, writing or building something in memory of those they have lost is a helpful way of both remembering and letting them pass on. Remember that accepting the loss and reconnecting with your life, is not the same as forgetting.



Some examples that veterans have found useful include:

- Planting something that flowers each year around the time they passed
- Lighting a candle to remember them
- Writing a poem
- Making a memory box to store reminders and keepsakes

You are a friend, a family member and how you feel is important. Gently stay connected to these roles in your life. You might find it difficult right now, so take your time and be kind to yourself.

Creative Exercise – See how grief may be affecting you

In this video, our Art Therapist, Mark, will talk through a creative exercise that will help you to better understand the ways in which grief might be affecting you.

<https://youtu.be/Bwk6YYTNWAU>



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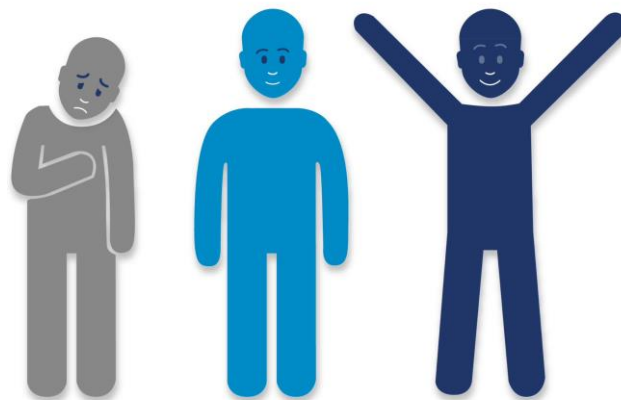
Before you press play, do take some time to find a quiet space in which to complete this activity. You will need a piece of A4 paper and some pens/pencils/crayons.

SECTION 6: REMEMBER THERE IS NO SET WAY TO GRIEVE

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section Six

Be kind to yourself

Remember that there is no set way to grieve. There is also no "normal" amount of time to grieve and your personal grieving process depends on many factors. By being kind to yourself, you will gradually move through this painful time.



What to do next

Before moving on to your next resource, it's important you take time to reflect on what you've learnt here and take time to implement your new methods. Give yourself time to adjust to your 'new normal' before moving on.

Some questions you might have

What to do if I'm still struggling with grief?

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It might take some time to start reaping the rewards of your efforts. As with any new skill, keep at it and you will find it easier to use these skills when you need them. While these resources aim to give you some tools to manage your difficulties in-the-moment, for many of you this will only be the beginning. With this in mind, Combat Stress also provides specialist treatment programmes to help you tackle the past and take on the future. If you would like to know more, you will find the details of our 24-hour helpline below.

How do I know what resource to do next?

You may remember when you first began these self-help guides, you filled out a questionnaire. This questionnaire enables us to guide you to the resources that will be most helpful to you. You'll find links to other guides in this series at <https://selfhelp.combatstress.org.uk/>

Is there someone I can contact if I need more help or information?

If you're a veteran and need to talk to someone, or you're a family member/carer worried about the mental health of a loved one who has served, please call our Helpline.

The Combat Stress 24-hour Helpline provides free confidential advice and support to veterans and their families. Don't struggle in silence.

Call 0800 138 1619

Are there any other resources that may help me?

- Cruse Bereavement Care: <https://www.cruse.org.uk/>
- Veterans' Gateway website: <https://www.veteransgateway.org.uk/>
- NHS Northumberland, Tyne and Wear online self-help materials: www.cntw.nhs.uk/home/accessible-information/easy-read/self-help-guides/

Urgent help

If you require more urgent help, either yourself or a member of your family feel unsafe, please contact your GP or telephone 111.

This information was publishing on 30 October 2020.

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