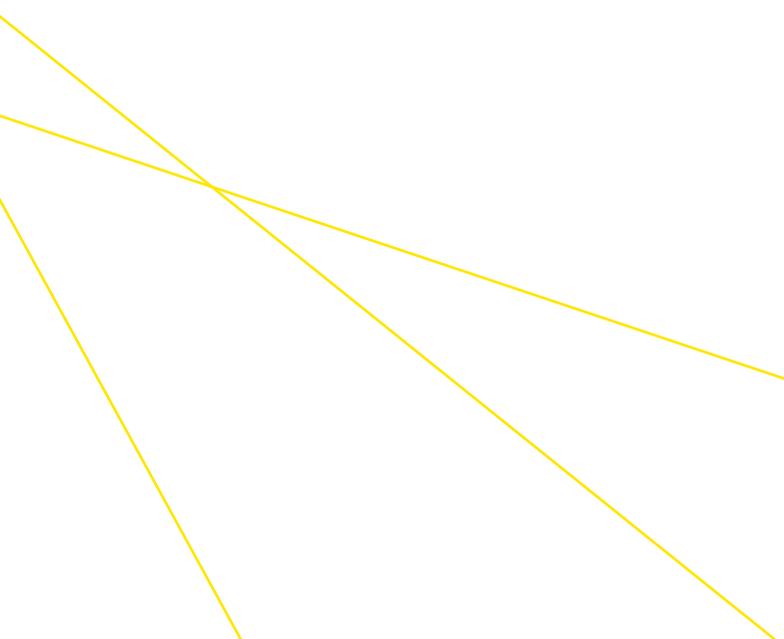




RIDING TO
CURE CANCER

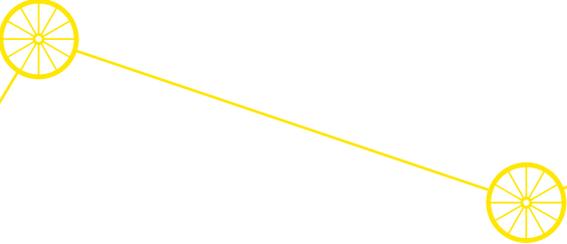
Grieving: Surviving to Thriving





Without question, the loss of someone close to you and dealing with the resultant grief is one of the hardest, most traumatic and emotional experiences that you will experience in life. It's a strange thing to write, but you'll also find it to be an experience that reveals a lot about you and those around you, and it may ultimately leave you personally enriched. Grieving is a process; the early stages are about coping and surviving, but in time you'll move through and reach a stage where you're able to thrive again. Accept that there is no defined path or timescale for this journey – everyone's experience is uniquely personal. The points discussed in this document are based on personal experiences gathered on individual journeys through the grieving process. The first section focuses on grieving from the perspective of having lost someone close to you, and the second relates to being around someone who is grieving, which for many is a very difficult situation to handle. The hope is that at least some of the points resonate and enable you to navigate your own very personal journey through the process of grieving.

You're Grieving.



HOW TO

We need to make this clear from the outset - there is no 'right way' to grieve. Grief is a very individual thing, which means that whatever feels right for you at a given time is right for you at that time. Grief changes constantly, and much like riding a bike, coping with grief is a skill you need to learn.

Try to think of grieving as a process: a releasing process, a discovery process and ultimately a healing process.

You need to be open to each phase and recognise that the pain you feel creates space for the long, slow work of healing.

Especially in the early stages, grief can feel like a huge hole that you're suddenly plunged into. While this may be the case, in time you'll crawl out of it and learn to walk around the edge without falling in, and even to stand at that edge and look into the hole without fear. You'll learn to deal with your grief. It will happen in the time required for you. There is no time

limit and everyone's experience is different.

THE RIGHT THING

Just as there's no right way to grieve, there's no right thing to say when you've lost someone close to you. Sometimes you'll want to talk about what happened, and other times you'll just want to forget about it for a while. Just be upfront with yourself and with others about how you feel. Being honest and giving the lead will help remove any potential awkwardness.



PRACTICAL STUFF

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There is no easy remedy. The death of a loved one brings with it multiple practical considerations. What do I do with their clothes? Bank accounts? Death certificates? Funeral to organise? Do I keep wearing the wedding band? Unfortunately, there's no simple response.

If you don't feel strong enough, then get help. Some people like to keep photos, clothes etc around, others like to clean out.

There is no easy or simple answer. It is, however, positive and constructive to think about these things and make decisions. They may change over time, but it is something you can control, something to keep you busy in the early stages of grief.



HONOUR THE PAST

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Changing what's happened is impossible. Honour the person you've lost. This can be through words, symbols or time. As anniversaries, birthdays and the like pass by, when that dive into sadness comes, take the opportunity to honour the person you have lost. Acknowledge your grief but remember fondly. Over time it may just be a thought, but this thought process may be very therapeutic.



TALK

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When you're grieving, your emotions are very likely to be all over the place. The important thing is to talk to your friends and family (or a grief counselor) about how you feel, even if you're emotional and even if you feel you're not making sense. Don't worry about it – their job is just to listen! Sadly, no amount of talking will bring back the person you've lost, but talking will help you to process the raw and negative emotions in your mind. You need to take the lead in this and not worry about protecting your friends and family – they will welcome the honesty, even if they don't quite know what to say.



KEEP A JOURNAL

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Keeping a personal journal is a safe way to talk. It's a different method of expressing frustration, fear, anxiety, confusion and loss. Articulating thoughts that you sometimes don't have the courage to share with others ... yet. It can also assist you in finding the right words or thought processes when you do share. It doesn't need to be complicated, long or formal. It can be a small entry one day followed by a big one the next, or any combination. You will know when it's right to stop.



THEY MEAN WELL

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As the bereaved one, talking with others can be very tough. No matter what those around you may have experienced, your grief is your grief and no one can ever really walk in your shoes. Often people say the daftest things with the best of intentions, like, “You’ll get over it and move forward,” and they may compare your situation with some other form of loss or separation. Well, the reality is that you may not get over it, but you WILL learn to live with it. You’ll develop a skin with a thickness that enables you to cope. You must also appreciate that most people don’t set out to upset you, they simply want to comfort you.



HELP!

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Going through the process of learning to deal with grief can be an emotional rollercoaster. Try to always remember that you’re not alone – there are hands to hold and shoulders to lean on, often from the most unlikely sources. As the bereaved one, your job is to ask for help as and when you need it. You’re not Superman or Wonder Woman, and you’re not expected to cope alone.



SEEK COUNSEL

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Even with the support of friends and family, bereavement will probably leave you in a confused and vulnerable state. If things are difficult then you should seek professional help – counseling is a very effective way to have someone check in on you. They can help you understand that what you’re going through is a perfectly normal stage in a difficult process. The Cancer Council provides a free counseling service and your doctor will be able to recommend a good practitioner. It’s important that you find someone you feel comfortable with and can relate to. It might not be the first person you see, and this is not a case of you being difficult or because of your grief. It’s simply the normal laws of attraction in any relationship.



DON'T FIGHT IT

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The emotions generated by losing someone are massive and complex. As they surface, the emotions need to be recognised, accepted and released. For men especially, this is not a time for being macho and for hiding emotions. You will feel the emotion, you will feel the urge to cry. Accept it, let it flow and afterwards you will feel emotionally and physically better. No one will think any less of you – in fact, probably quite the opposite. Pain does hold the key to healing, so be sure to sit with it for a while in the space that loss creates. STUGS (Sudden Temporary Upsurges of Grief) is a recognised medical term – don’t fight it!



OKAY IS OK

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You'll find that the emotion comes in waves and with fluctuating frequency.

You won't feel terrible every day, especially once you've got through the first few weeks. You need to recognise that there will be days when you feel pretty much okay or emotionally neutral, and others where you feel happy.

You may feel shocked and guilty that you can enjoy things and laugh - do not! Simply accept it for what it is. Yes, you've lost someone, but that doesn't mean you must be miserable all day, every day. It's not your fault that your lost one is no longer here - you are entitled to smile again. If you feel good, then go with it. Enjoy yourself and do not, under any circumstances, think that somehow you're not grieving properly or are disrespecting the person you have lost. It's about seeing this as an "AND" situation, not an "EITHER, OR". You can be happy AND still mourn the loss of your loved one.



NOT OKAY IS OK

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The flip side of okay is NOT okay. There will be times when you feel flat and sad, possibly even years later. You have to accept that too - it is all part of loss and of the grieving process.



IT CAN GET WORSE

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For the first few days after losing someone, you may feel emotionally numb. It's a pretty horrendous period. However, the reality is that things may get worse before they get better. In the immediate aftermath of loss, you will find yourself plunged into a period of organisation. It can be a daunting and emotional process; a funeral director needs to be chosen, a coffin selected, you may need to prepare a eulogy and organise a wake. It all seems totally unfair, but then comes the emotion of the funeral service and possibly the unbearably harsh reality of collecting the ashes of your loved one. On the positive side, you may find that this period of organisation and of having something practical to focus on helps to control your emotions.

Sadly, this 'getting worse' phase can last a long time. The first months are very tough and you probably can't quite grasp that your loved one has gone. Gradually, you do accept that they won't be back, but there's still a long way to go. You expect the first year to be tough, with all the anniversaries, birthdays etc, but year two may be worse as you start to accept that this is how life will be. Hopefully by this stage, you're in a better position to create a new normal for yourself. It seems like a never-ending period of painful emotion; however, things will start to get better.



DON'T CHANGE TOO MUCH

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It can be very tempting in these tumultuous times to make a big change - sell the house, quit your job, go travelling, etc. While these might eventually be correct courses of action, sometimes it's best to simply give yourself the right time to be sure these decisions are correct for you. Now is not the time to rush. Give it a year if you can.



ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

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When you lose someone, it's very easy to focus on the difficult times you have experienced: to pick through the details of what happened, to look for things that could have been done differently, and to find someone to blame. Do not do it. It won't change anything, and emotionally will probably only make you feel worse. Instead, try to focus on the good things in the here and now – yes, there will be some. If it's really hard, keep a gratitude diary and list a few things each day that were good, even if it's just what you had for lunch. Try to remember the good things that happened in the past. The thing to remember is that the sooner you can start being positive, the sooner you're going to start feeling better.



STAY STRONG, BE BRAVE.

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No matter how upbeat you may have been feeling, there are times when emotionally you will feel yourself being drawn into a downward spiral that ends in bleak emotion and negativity. If you find yourself heading in that direction, try making a conscious decision to think about positive things: good memories of the other person, something entirely unrelated but positive, or simply playing uplifting music. Try to manage the emotion, rather than letting it manage you – something that's much easier to do armed with good memories and a playlist of good tunes. Some days, it will be harder than others to achieve this, but if you're brave and strong, you will make it!



FIND A WAY

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You need to find a strategy to enable you to manage your way through the process of grieving. One approach is to think of the difficult times that you've experienced as locked away in a box. Once you're in this mindset, you can reflect on life before and after the difficult times, but the period in-between is locked away and off limits. This may be especially useful in the early stages of grieving - just don't go there. There may be occasions where you feel the need to re-visit the difficult times. If you are feeling strong then by all means, open the box and look inside. However, it may be a couple of years before you'll wish to go there on a regular basis. This approach may or may not work for you; however, being proactive and trying a few things will help you to cope. You'll know your own personal trigger points, and hopefully these will enable you to work out coping strategies. On occasions, even with all the strategies in the world, you will find yourself heading into the yawning chasm of grief – these are the times to call a friend or to get professional help.



GOOD TIMES

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It sounds like a very odd thing to say, and initially it may not be possible, but try to be grateful for the great times you spent with your friend or relative. Sadly many people go through life without ever meeting that truly special person, their soul mate. If you have, you're lucky. It's heartbreaking to lose someone so special to you, but the fact that you are grieving means you have been fortunate enough to meet a very special person. Hard though it will initially be, try to be grateful for the fact that you met, for the happy times you experienced and the love you shared. Gratitude is a major key to acceptance.



CHOOSE LIFE

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This may well be a difficult thing to do in the early stages of grieving, however in the aftermath of losing someone you have two options for how you approach life. The first option is to feel sorry for yourself, to be negative and to turn in on life. The second option is to be positive, to get out there and to embrace life. The strong recommendation is to choose the latter option – it's what the other person would have wanted, indeed what any normal person would want you to do in the same situation. The hard part is that you have to take the lead and be proactive in making a new life for yourself. Friends and family will be there for you, but they have their own lives and yours is now very different. You may find that you'll do some things the same and others differently. When you're able, you'll need to pick up the phone and arrange to do a few things, and maybe develop new interests.



DO IT ANYWAY

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There may well be activities or trips that you'd planned to do with your friend or partner and will sadly now never have the chance to do together. When the time is right you may well benefit from getting out there and doing the things you'd planned. In a way, doing so is to honour the person you've lost, but you're also likely to feel emotionally close to them as you do things you had planned to do together.



OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

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You may also find that there are things that you had thought of doing but had not done because they may not have interested your loved one. Well, you now have the opportunity to do them!



LIFE GOES ON

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When you lose someone close to you it feels like your world has come to an end. However, very quickly you'll realise that's actually far from the case. While you're wrapped up in a world of loss and grief, the everyday things still have to be done – bills need paying, groceries need buying, the kids need looking after, and the grass will certainly be growing! Initially you may resent these intrusions into your grief, but keeping on top of the day-to-day may help get you through the worst. Gradually, you may even start to embrace the routine chores as they bring important structure and normality to your life.



JUST SAY NO

After your loss, you may feel the need to drink – possibly to excess. If you find this to be the case, you'll probably find that you're not really enjoying or tasting it, but are actually drinking to blot out reality and to escape. Alcohol can provide a short-term release from grief, but it will most likely disturb your sleep and leave you jaded. It is not a great approach to start the morning feeling worse than you did at the beginning of the night before. You may want to think about quitting alcohol until the emotion is less raw, or at the very least drinking in real moderation. A related point: try to ensure that you get some form of regular exercise. As an example, an early morning swim or walk gives you a reason to get out of bed, and gives time for the quiet reflection that is so important.



GET OUT THERE

Grieving can be a very lonely process - probably less so in the immediate stages when friends are regularly checking in on you, but after a couple of months when you are left alone more often, you may find you have unwelcome time on your hands. At this point, it is important to be sociable and to get active. It might be a case of getting involved in a group activity: tennis, book groups, voluntary work, etc. or it might be meeting up with friends for dinner. Whatever it is, the important thing is to get out there and to be around other people. Mixing with others will help keep your mind away from the negative and will help you move on. Remember, however, that like most things in life you need to achieve a balance that works for you, and in this case you need to balance the doing with ensuring that you get enough down time. The temptation is to say yes to everything, but this may not be the way to go. Be aware of what you really need at any point in time, and be prepared to say no. In the early days, it may pay to have an escape route planned; for example, drive to social events and warn your hosts that you may leave early.



SPLENDID ISOLATION

You will most definitely need time to lick your wounds and to reflect. Grieving is tiring, so you also need to allow for rest. With luck, you'll come to a point where you really start to enjoy your own company and your own space. Try to focus on the benefits of aloneness, which is very different to loneliness, and recognise that it's a luxury to have the freedom to do what you want, when you want. It's very hard to see this in the initial stages of grief, but it will come with time.



GET PLANNING

A little further down the track, the big public holidays and anniversaries loom large: the first Christmas, the first birthday and then the first anniversary of your loss. Each brings with it a spike in emotion and can still be difficult to deal with, even years later. Even if you're not the best at planning these things in advance, at least for the first couple of years try to make sure that you know how you're going to get through these milestones. Don't leave it to chance. Either get planning, or get others to plan for you. Remember: others you trust, and who care for you, will be happy to be able to help you, so enlist their help. Your plan may well include some quiet time and the chance to sit with things for a while. You may also want to reflect on what you've achieved since your loved one passed - it will be a lot more than you have realised and that can be very empowering.



NOT JUST YOU

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In the initial stages of grieving, it is totally understandable to feel isolated and alone. You may feel that you're the only person going through something like this, and how desperately unfair that is. The reality is that there are many others going through the same thing and feeling the same way as you. The fact that you are not alone in your grief is very sad, but somehow knowing that you're not alone can also be comforting and help to provide a sense of perspective. You may find it comforting to reach out to others in a similar position, in which case you should do so. To be around people who are a little further down the path of grieving may be a positive thing for you. They are doing okay, and therefore so will you ... in time.



NEVER COMPARE

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Never compare. A wise person once said that you should never compare grief.

People react to loss in different ways at different times. Just because your grief appears to be stronger or more visible does not mean that you are grieving more than they are, or vice-versa.

Grief is individual; do not be tempted to compare yours with others, or to gauge how you're coping by comparing yourself to someone else. Everyone's journey is different and no one can ever truly understand your situation. We are all very different.



SPIRITUALITY

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This point is very personal. If you are spiritually inclined then you may find comfort in the church or spiritual groups. You may want to have a special place where you can spend time thinking and relating to your loved one
– possibly somewhere you spent time together.



CLICHÉ TIME

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It won't seem like it initially, but the cliché about time being a great healer is absolutely true. Obviously there's no magic date after which things start to get easier but gradually, as the months and years pass, your loss will become easier to deal with. Losing someone close to you is like losing a limb – you miss it for the rest of your life, but you also learn to live without it. With the passage of time, it becomes much easier to focus on the positive and to leave the difficult memories locked in their box. Loss becomes part of your life story. Your past is interwoven with your present and with your future, and it shapes the person that you are. Do not fight that, it is just the way it is.



A BETTER YOU

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Finally, one day you may find yourself facing the realisation that you're a better person because of your loss. That is a very strange thing to write, but most would reflect that it's true. In time, you may come to recognise and to be grateful for the positive impact your loss has had on you. Of course you would undo the loss and the hurt if you could, but you can't, so at least try to see one of the very few positive things to come out of it. Going through the process of loss, grieving and rebuilding your life makes you realise just how much you're capable of. It puts trivial things into perspective, helps you seize opportunities, makes you more aware of your emotions, makes you grateful for what you have, and reinforces how fragile and short our lives are. You'll be a more compassionate and understanding person than before, and be very firm in your values and what is truly important to you in life. Ultimately, acceptance of loss and embracing what is left is the only way out of grief.

They're Grieving.



TOUCH BASE

The best thing you can do is to keep in regular contact with the bereaved. Check in with them regularly. Do they need anything doing? Do they want to talk? Would they like to go out? It doesn't have to be much; a quick phone call or a text is enough to let them know you are there and that you care. Recognise and remember that just because they're okay one day or don't need help one week, does not mean that they're okay all the time. Keep checking in, but don't be overly intrusive. Some people can appear to feed off your grief, which is not helpful.



TALK

It can be desperately difficult to be around a friend or relative who has lost someone close to them. Not knowing what to say, witnessing the raw emotion and being unsure of how to help is very challenging, especially as you may be in the process of grieving yourself.

No matter how hard it may be, don't avoid talking just because it's difficult. Given the situation, your job is to be there for the other person. Ask the bereaved person if they'd like to talk about their loved one, and be okay with a yes or a no. One of the frustrations for the recently bereaved is that often people avoid talking because it is difficult and they feel awkward, when actually the bereaved friend or relative may want to talk about how they feel or about their loss.



SAY WHAT?

Say what? There is no 'right thing' to say to someone who has just lost someone.

Just show up, be yourself and talk naturally. It's not just you; in that situation most people are awkward, clumsy and believe they are saying the wrong thing. The key is to accept that there is no right thing to say. The one thing the other person wants you to say, that you can bring back their partner, you can't do.



And finally ... a powerful quote from Heidi Postlewaite, a UN peacekeeper who lost her partner:

“

You make it through the long weeping nights when the ravens come to scratch at your eyes, and then, one morning after a very long time, you hear a rose bloom and the sun no longer makes you sad. You feel clear and privileged to have shared a life. You take each moment and hold it on your tongue and taste the bitter, the sweet and the sour and know that life is beautiful, and you are grateful for the gift. The long night is over and life starts anew.

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For more information
on Tour de Cure
www.tourdecure.com.au

Phil Gallant, Ann Smith
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