Coping with Loss
When a Loved One Dies

Hospice by the Bay

SERVING MARIN, SAN FRANCISCO, N. SAN MATEO & SONOMA COUNTIES
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On behalf of Hospice by the Bay, our thoughts are with you and your family during this difficult time. We realize that the weeks and months before and following a death can be difficult. You are not alone. You have our ongoing support for your well-being. Please call on us any time.

Many people experience a variety of physical and emotional discomforts when coping with loss, especially in the first months to a year after a death. Talking to others can help ease your mind and heart.

We offer you and your family grief support services, such as private and group counseling, educational materials on coping with grief and referrals to additional community resources. We also encourage you to share feelings with friends and family who can listen supportively.

We hope that this booklet is helpful to you and your family. Please know that you can call on us for support.

Sincerely,

Hospice by the Bay Bereavement Services

(415) 526-5699 • (707) 931.7299
Our Philosophy

Grief is a normal reaction to the loss of a loved one. It is a natural, universal experience that can be physically and emotionally stressful. Yet, each person’s grief is felt and expressed in individual ways, as we adapt to the life changes that arise after someone has died. Our counseling provides support and education to help you move toward a healthy adjustment following loss.

To meet varying needs, Hospice by the Bay offers grief support services to family members whose loved one was in our care, as well as members of the community who are coping with loss. Family members are notified of year-round events and support group schedules. Some services are available to them at no charge. Community members who are anticipating or have experienced a loss are eligible for counseling on a sliding-fee scale.

In our provision of care, Hospice by the Bay does not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, color, age, handicap, ethnicity or ability to pay.
Find Support for Grief after Loss

Hospice by the Bay’s experienced counselors offer comfort through grief support and education to anyone grieving a loss, including children and teens.

Individual and Family Counseling
One-on-one counseling allows you to privately explore feelings, understand your responses to grief, and face personal and practical challenges in healthy ways. We can also help couples or families learn how best to support each other after a shared loss. Counseling visits are usually weekly, during the day or evening.

Support Groups
Talking with others who share a similar sense of loss offers emotional support and connection, and eases feelings of isolation. Led by a grief counselor, our six- or eight-week groups offer you time to express feelings, learn how others cope with loss and better understand the grief process.

Our groups focus on topics such as parental or spousal/partner loss, or children’s grief. Current groups are listed on our website. Both day and evening groups are offered. Some groups meet once a week for several weeks in succession and others are a single session.

Youth Grief Support Program
To comfort grieving children ages 4 to 18, Hospice by the Bay offers individual and family counseling and age-appropriate support groups. The creative arts and play are often used in activities for youth. Our counselors offer school presentations for children about grief, as well as on-site grief support groups. Our annual, summer, grief support camp weekend, Camp Erin® Oakland/Bay Area is free of charge to campers ages 6 to 17.
Information and Referral
We can provide information by phone about community resources that support those with chronic illness, or to answer questions about grief and loss. We also have printed materials that can be helpful.

Spiritual Services
Our Spiritual Support Counselors are available to talk with patients and family members of any faith or secular tradition.

Grief Education
We offer presentations to schools and community groups about the grief process, including how to help grieving children.

Community Memorial Gatherings
Our annual Services of Remembrance and Lights of Remembrance community memorial gatherings to honor and remember loved ones are led by our Spiritual Support and Bereavement staff.

Lending Library
We lend books, audio and videotapes and CDs on grief and loss. Ask us for a bibliography of books for adults and children.

Characteristics Of Grief

Because grief can be so painful, even overwhelming, it frightens us. Many people wonder if they are grieving in the “right” way and if what they feel is normal. Many people who suffer a loss experience some of the following:

Physical Characteristics
• A tightness in the throat or bodily tension; frequent sighing.
• A loss of appetite and/or increased eating.
• A chronic feeling of tiredness and/or muscle weakness, numbness.
• Feeling dizzy, short of breath, or headachy.
• Because these symptoms can also be signs of health problems, we recommend that you have a physical examination early in your grief process. Consult your physician if the symptoms persist.

Emotional Characteristics
• Feeling numb or in shock. Expecting to see the loved one, even though you know the person is gone.
• Feeling depressed and sad, that life has no meaning.
• Feeling isolated and separated from others.
• Feeling angry at God.
• Feeling angry at and abandoned by the one who died.
• Feeling anger toward others whose lives seem happy.
• Experiencing sudden changes of mood.
• Crying at unexpected times.
• Feeling a yearning for life as it used to be.
• Spending much time reviewing the past.
• Feeling apathetic, with loss of interest in usual activities.
• Feeling guilt over real or imagined wrongdoings.
• Feeling guilt over times when you are happy.
• Feeling fearful of the uncertainty of life without your loved one, as well as afraid of dying or having other loved ones die.
• An increase of emotional distress at anniversary dates, birthdays and other special occasions.

Behavioral Characteristics
• Difficulty going to sleep or staying asleep. Vivid dreams about the person who died, or the absence of dreaming.
• Replaying memories of the person’s last days, weeks or hours.
• Lowered self-esteem.
• Restlessness. Difficulty concentrating and making decisions.
• Forgetfulness. Starting things and not remembering what you were doing.
• Sensing the presence of the one who died, sometimes expecting her/him to return.
• An urge to fill the days with constant activity/busy-ness.
• Decreased desire for socializing.
• Lowered interest in sexual activity.
• Sometimes during grieving, there is a tendency to use alcohol or drugs more than usual. This way of responding to pain delays grief rather than resolving it. It is not helpful in the long run.

   The above are all natural and normal grief responses.
   It is important to give yourself enough time to cry and to talk with people about your experience.

**Losing Someone Close Changes Your Life**

The pain of grief differs, depending on who you lose:

**A Parent**
You may feel “abandoned.” You may also feel more vulnerable about dying yourself.

**A Partner or Spouse**
When you are no longer part of a couple, you may feel isolated and insecure.

**A Child**
You may unjustly blame yourself because you were not capable of “saving” your child.

**An Unborn or Newborn Child**
You may feel robbed of your dreams and hopes for the future, for yourself and for the child.

**Companions In Life**
Loss of intimacy and connection can be profound when grieving for siblings, close relatives, friends, co-workers and beloved family pets.
Caring For Yourself

Here are some helpful self-care ideas that can ease grief:

• Get sufficient rest.
• Acknowledge your emotions as they arise. Allow yourself to move in and out of painful feelings. Allow yourself crying time.
• Eat nutritious meals, and take a vitamin supplement if needed.
• Exercise daily: take walks, jog, bicycle, etc.
• Pamper yourself. Get a massage or back rub. Soak in a hot bath.
• Lower expectations of yourself; you won’t be functioning at 100%.
• Postpone major decisions. Give yourself permission to forego unnecessary activities and to say no.
• Keep a journal. Express your feelings in writing.
• Cultivate a supportive environment of friends who will listen and not judge. Accept comfort from others.
• Take a meditation class, or join a prayer group.
• Look to your faith for comfort.
• Release anger. Scream in the car, or hit a bed with a tennis racquet.
• Add life to your home: a cat, fish, plants, flowers, etc.
• Listen to yourself. Realize that you know what is right for you.
• Buy something for yourself that you would really enjoy.
• Nurture a sense of humor.
• Read something uplifting.
• Travel, even if only locally.
• Listen to music, or go to a movie, play or art gallery.
• Take a class in a topic that interests you.
• Join a grief support group through Hospice by the Bay, your church, a mental health agency or community organization.
• Stay connected to your loved one by sharing memories, keeping a scrapbook, creating rituals in your loved one’s memory, or completing a project he or she started.
• Think of what is still beautiful or meaningful to you each day.
Some misconceptions and incorrect ideas about the grieving process:

- All losses are the same.
- All bereaved people grieve in the same way.
- Rituals and funerals are unimportant in helping us cope.
- Being upset and grieving means that you do not believe in God or trust your religion or faith.
- Grief will affect you only psychologically.
- It is unimportant for you to have social support in your grief.
- It’s possible to avoid the pain of grief and resolve it successfully.
- It takes two months to get over your grief.
- Grief always declines over time in a steadily decreasing fashion.
- When grief is resolved, it never comes up again.
- Family members will always help grievers.
- You and your family will be the same after the death as before.
- You will have no relationship with your loved one after the death.
- The intensity and length of your grief are testimony to your love for the deceased.
- It’s wrong if you do not always feel close to your other family members, since you should be happy that they are still alive.
- It’s wrong to think that part of you died with your loved one.
- If you are a widow, you should grieve like other widows.
- Losing someone to sudden death is the same as losing someone to an anticipated death.
- You won’t be affected much if a parent dies when you are an adult.
- Once your loved one has died, it is better not to focus on them, but to put them in the past and go on with your life.
• Children grieve like adults.
• Infant death shouldn’t be too difficult to resolve because you didn’t know the child for very long.
• Children need to be protected from grief and death.
• Someone lost a spouse knows what it is like losing a child.
• Parents usually divorce after a child dies.
• If in doubt about what to say to a bereaved person, offer a cliché.
• Feeling sorry for yourself is not allowable.
• It is better to tell bereaved people to “be brave” and “keep a stiff upper lip” because they won’t have to experience as much pain.
• It is better to put painful things out of your mind.
• You should not think about your loved one at holidays because it will make you too sad.
• You only need to express your feelings to resolve your grief.
• Expressing feelings that are intense is the same as losing control.
• There is no reason to be angry at people who tried to do their best for your loved one.
• There is no reason to be angry at your loved one who has died.

_How many of the statements above do you believe?_  
Each one is a myth. None are true.  
These feelings are all normal.
Appropriate Expectations for Yourself When Feeling Grief

- Your grief will take longer than most people think.
- Your grief will take on more energy than you imagine. You may feel like you are going crazy.
- Your grief will involve many changes and will continually develop.
- Your grief will show itself in all parts of your life—psychological, social, physical and spiritual.
- You’ll mourn for your loved one and for the hopes, dreams and unfulfilled expectations you held for and with that person, and for the needs that will go unmet.
- You will feel some anger and guilt.
- You may feel a lack of self-concern.
- You may experience acute upsurges of grief that occur suddenly.
- You will have trouble thinking clearly and making decisions.
- You may begin a search for meaning, and may question your religion and/or philosophy of life.
- You may find yourself having physical reactions.
- Society will have unrealistic expectations about your mourning and may respond inappropriately to you.
- Your grief will involve a variety of feelings and reactions.
- The loss will bring up old issues, feelings and unresolved conflicts.
- You will have some identity confusion after a major loss. You can experience reactions that may be quite different for you.
- You may experience a combination of anger and depression, with feelings such as irritability, frustration, annoyance, or intolerance.
- Certain dates, events and stimuli may bring upsurges in grief.

Your grief will be idiosyncratic and dependent upon the meaning of your loss, personal characteristics, the type of death, your social support and physical state. It can bring an intense amount of emotion that will surprise you and those around you.

Grief will also manifest in more ways than you anticipated. Expect to see brief upsurges at anniversary and holiday times, and in response to certain stimuli that remind you of what you have lost.
Eight Myths about Children, Adolescents and Loss

by Kenneth J. Doka, Ph.D., M. Div.

1. Children don’t grieve, or only when they reach a certain age.
   Children grieve at any age. The way grief is shown will vary depending on the child’s age, development and experiences.

2. The death of a loved one is the only major loss that children and adolescents experience.
   Children and adolescents experience a range of losses. They can feel grief at the loss of a pet, dreams, separations by divorce or relocation, losses of friends or relationships, as well as losses due to illness or death.

3. It is better to shield children from loss. They are too young to experience tragedy.
   Although we’d like to protect children from loss, it is impossible. Keeping them in the dark can increase fears and breed feelings of resentment and helplessness. It’s better to support them by teaching and modeling ways of adapting to loss and including them in the grief process.

4. Children should not go to funerals. Children should always attend funerals.
   Children and teens should have the choice as to how they wish to participate in funeral rituals. They need information, options and support of their choices by adults.

5. Children get over loss quickly.
   No one gets over significant loss. Children, like adults, will learn to live with the loss and may revisit that loss at different points in their development.
6. Children are permanently scarred by early significant loss.
   While loss can affect development, solid support and strong continuity of care can assist children as they learn to live with loss.

7. Talking with children and adolescents is the most effective approach to dealing with loss.
   While there is much value in openly communicating verbally, there are approaches that allow creative ways of expression. Play, art, dance, music, activity and ritual are examples of modes children and teens may use to express grief and adapt to loss.

8. Helping young people deal with loss is the family’s responsibility.
   Families do have a critical responsibility, but it is shared with other individuals and organizations, such as hospices, schools, faith communities — as well as the community at large. In times of significant loss, remember that the ability of family members to support one another can be limited.
Hospice by the Bay
Youth Grief Support Program

Individual and Group Counseling
• Individual and family support
• Single-meeting support workshops
• Annual youth grief support camp

School Programs
• On-site grief support groups
• Classroom presentations
• Faculty trainings
• Crisis intervention / stress management

Community Outreach
• Training for community agency staff, counseling students and interns
• Community group presentations
• Lending library
• Educational literature
Marin County
17 East Sir Francis Drake Blvd.
Larkspur, CA  94939
Main: (415) 927.2273
Grief Support: (415) 526.5699

San Francisco / N. San Mateo Counties
180 Redwood Street, Suite 350
San Francisco, CA  94102
Main: (415) 626.5900
Grief Support: (415) 526.5699

Sonoma County
190 West Napa St.
Sonoma, CA  95476
Main: (707) 935.7504
Grief Support: (707) 931.7299

www.hospicebythebay.org