

# LIVING *with* LOSS

## GRIEF TRIGGERS: HOLIDAYS, SPECIAL OCCASIONS, AND OTHER REMINDERS OF LOSS



*"Grief is the price we pay for love."*

– Queen Elizabeth II

Grief is a complex reaction to loss that can often be intense and overwhelming. Although the experience of grief is unique to each person, it can often be an emotionally, physically, and spiritually taxing experience. Each year, a flood of emotions may arise when we remember our loved ones on their birthdays or special anniversaries such as marriage anniversaries or the anniversary of the loss. But reminders of someone you love may move beyond dates — triggers of loved ones are everywhere, including smells, sights, songs, traditions, other people's deaths, and new events that you think your loved would have enjoyed.

### **PREPARING FOR GRIEF TO RETURN**

According to the Mayo Clinic, grief is unpredictable. As a result, it can pop up with no warning signs. Even if it has been years since your loved one's passing, intense feelings and emotions can be "reawakened" during these times and can be triggered by reminders of your loved one. Feelings associated with specific dates, such as birthdays, holidays, or anniversaries are sometimes referred to as an "anniversary reaction." These intense feelings and emotions are not setbacks in your grief process. Instead, they show the significance your loved one had on you and in your life, according to the Mayo Clinic. Reawakened grief can be as strong as when

you first experienced your loss. The following emotional and physical symptoms are commonly associated with grief:

- Aches and pain
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Confusion
- Crying spells
- Depression
- Disbelief
- Disorganization
- Fatigue
- Fear
- Guilt
- Loneliness
- Lowered immunity
- Nausea
- Pain
- Sadness
- Shock and disbelief
- Tension
- Things seems unreal
- Trouble sleeping
- Weight loss or gain

### TIPS FOR COPING WITH SPECIAL OCCASIONS AND OTHER REMINDERS OF LOSS

Various occasions, dates, and reminders can repeatedly trigger and reawaken your grief. This is not a sign of weakness — this is you grieving in your own way. You are embracing the strong emotions that are reminders of the importance that your loved one had on you and in your life. You are not alone in your grief, and according to the Mayo Clinic, there are ways to cope and heal.

**Prepare yourself.** It is normal to experience “anniversary reactions.” Planning ahead can help you understand your feelings and even turn the event into an opportunity for celebrating and healing. It may also help you to plan for a distraction, such as surrounding yourself with support so that you are not alone.

**Permit yourself to feel your emotions.** It is natural to feel overwhelmed or sad at the reminder of your loss, but it is OK to allow yourself to be happy or joyful when celebrating special occasions as well. Experiencing conflicting emotions around special occasions is very common. According to the Mayo Clinic, “You might find yourself both laughing and crying.”

**Reflect on your memories with your loved one.** Speaking about your loved one can allow you to feel more comfortable opening up about your memories or feelings that you are currently experiencing. Telling stories and sharing happy memories of your loved one can also provide a sense of comfort. You may also want to reflect on memories personally and privately. For example, you can write about the emotions associated with your loss to express your grief without worry about how others might react. Writing about grief has been found to have meaning and value to those who are grieving.

**Create a tradition.** Put together a special event or celebration in remembrance of your loved one. This can be as simple as sharing memories or photographs during a family celebration, lighting a candle during a spiritual or religious gathering, or sharing art, music,





prayer, and poetry in remembrance of the loved one. You can even make their favorite holiday meal or play their favorite holiday songs. Keep in mind that remembrance does not always have to happen on a significant day or during a special occasion. You can also keep memories alive by reminiscing around the dinner table when sharing a family meal.

**Reach out for support.** Leaning on others can help when grief reawakens around special occasions. It is often helpful to reach out for support from those in your usual social networks, such as friends and family. You can also reach out for support through bereavement support groups, whether in person or online, to have an outlet to express your emotions and share stories about your loved one with others who understand what you are going through.

**Volunteer your time to a cause to commemorate your loved one.** To many, special occasions and holidays are times of giving, and what better gift is the gift of time in the name of your loved one. For example, if your loved one was connected to a specific cause or organization, you can get involved in that specific organization's events (e.g., The American Cancer Society, National Suicide Prevention Hotline, Alzheimer's Association). You can volunteer in your community for a good cause, such as giving gifts to children or food to families who cannot provide for themselves. Volunteer efforts can help redirect the pain of grief during special occasions and can create a meaningful connection to and memory of your loved one.

## CONCLUSION

Grief is unavoidable, and grief is messy, according to grief expert and psychotherapist Debbie Augenthaler. As a result, she tells her clients and readers, "it's OK to be a griever." She experienced loss and grief firsthand when her husband unexpectedly died of a heart attack in her arms. She knows grief has no timeline and she has learned that anniversary reactions and reawakened grief can leave you spinning. But it is also important to recognize and trust that grief usually becomes less intense with time and you are able to find joy, hope, and happiness after loss. If, however, your grief gets worse with time or begins to disrupt your daily routines and activities, you should contact a health-care professional or mental health provider. Grief that does not get better with time is referred to as complicated grief, and it can lead to depression and other mental and physical health concerns. Having a supportive network of people that can allow you to express your thoughts and feelings and validate your experience can be invaluable during this time.

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