



Grief is a journey, here's how you  
can work your way through it.

# For those experiencing grief and loss.

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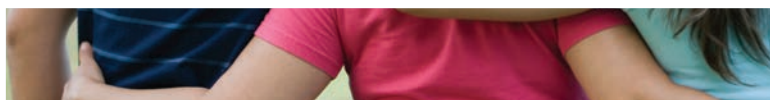
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# INTRODUCTION

## Lost.

The word can come up in so many places.

**"I lost my parents to cancer."**

**"I lost my relationship when my partner and I broke up."**

**"I lost my house in the floods."**

**"I lost my job."**

We all face loss at some point in our lives.

**This booklet is for you if you are facing loss** and grief in your life right now.

This booklet is written with a number of goals in mind:

- To give you **information** about the experience of loss and grief, and how it can affect your life;

- To tell you about the different **things you may have to face and work through** as part of your experience; and,

- To help guide you around the challenges and opportunities of returning to work.

Above all, it is written with a deep respect of what you are going through. It is written knowing that not everything that you read will relate to you and your situation, but with the hope that there will be things in here that will help you through this time.

# SECTION 1

## The Five Things You Need to Know About Loss.



# 1. We all have a story of loss.

## Loss is normal and grief is natural.

Consider the following questions: What is your first memory of loss? What was your most intense experience of grief? What have been some recent losses in your life? What loss has most made you the person you are today?

Some of these questions may take a bit of thinking to answer, but all adult human beings on the planet have answers to these questions. Why? Because **we all have a story of loss in our lives**. Yours may be about the death of a loved one. Mine may be about the loss of a job. His may be about the breakdown of a relationship and hers may be about a life-changing illness. Our stories will be unique but the fact remains: we all have a story of loss.

Loss is not a disease. Loss does not mean something is wrong with you. Loss does not mean you have failed in some way.

Loss is a normal, natural event, and **grief is a normal, natural response**. Whenever we experience loss, we also experience grief.

Even though grief can be uncomfortable and painful, it is one of the most natural healing processes we know, similar to the pain felt as a broken bone heals.

As you think about loss and grief be sure to remember that grief is not like chicken pox, where once you have had it you are immune for life. In fact, even if you have experienced a number of losses before, grief often hits us with the same level of shock as it ever had.

**Why do we grieve?** For the simple reason that the person or thing that we have lost has been important to us. Grieving means that we have put time, energy, love and care into something in our life that is no longer there. Therefore, grief is actually a sign of how much we valued the person or thing that was lost.

## 2. Loss has many faces; we need to learn to recognise all of them.

One of the most recognisable experiences of loss and grief is the death of someone who is special to you in some way. The loss involved is of that person and everything they meant to the people around them. Grief involves readjusting to a 'new world' that does not have this person in it. The experience may be filled with intense feelings, strong physical sensations and all sorts of thoughts and actions that are particular to the experience.





People are sometimes surprised to hear that it is not necessary for someone to die to experience loss and grief. In fact, loss is part of many life experiences. Loss may appear to you as the death of a loved one. But it may also appear as the end of a relationship. Or it may appear in unemployment or retirement, in illness or disability, in moving house, in natural disaster, or in changing work demands.

In fact, in almost any life event that involves some change, loss will probably be present. Change, by definition, means moving from something old to something new, and that means leaving some things behind. If leaving these things behind is seen as negative by the person involved, then they are likely to experience some level of loss and grief.

We must learn that **loss has many faces**. The more we can learn to **recognise the faces of loss** in the many life experiences of change, the better we will be able to recognise and respond to our own and other people's experience of grief.

**Losses are also like termites: they rarely exist alone.** If one thing changes in a person's life, it is likely that other things will change as well. Each of these changes will have their own losses involved. Take, for example, the loss that happens when a marriage or relationship with a long-term partner ends. There will, of course, be the loss of the relationship with that person, but there may also be loss of time with children. There may be the loss of losing the family home, or even town. There may be financial loss of reduced income or cost involved in the separation.

Therefore, if you or someone else is experiencing a loss in their life, it will probably mean that there are other losses present as well.

### 3. Your experience of grief will be as unique as you are.

There is only one thing that is an iron-clad guarantee in loss and grief:

#### **Your experience of grief will be as unique as you are.**

Grief is an experience which can saturate every part of our lives.

The ingredients for our experience of loss and grief are emotional, physical, mental and social/behavioural.

- Emotionally we can feel sad, angry, guilty, anxious, powerless, lonely, tired, shocked, numb, isolated and yearning.
- Physically we can experience emptiness in the stomach, tightness in the chest, lump in throat, breathlessness, weakness in the muscles, feeling weighed down, nausea, heart palpitations and disturbances in appetite and sleep.
- Mentally we can have an increased awareness of death, sense of disbelief, confusion, preoccupation with the loss, negative self-talk, flashbacks, and difficulty putting the experience into words.
- Behaviourally we can experience anything from social withdrawal, restlessness, crying, sighing, treasuring objects, avoiding triggers of memories, and feeling easily startled.





These lists in no way cover the whole range of feelings, thoughts and behaviours that can be involved in loss, but they give an indication of the variety of experiences. The ingredients that are present in any one person will be unique to that person and will mix together in a unique way. Therefore, one of the best things you can do for a person is **to give him or her the time, space and permission to grieve in their own way.**

Some of the things that will affect what ingredients will be present and how they mix together will include:

- **Past experiences.** What we have experienced so far in life – including our past experiences of loss and grief – will affect the way we grieve.
- **Culture.** The expression of grief and the rituals that surround a loss are often closely tied to one's culture.
- **Gender.** The different genders, both by nature and the way they are nurtured, often have different ways of relating to loss and grief, and these need to be acknowledged when someone is going through these experiences.
- **Other things going on in life.** Loss affects the rest of our lives, but it is also true that the rest of our life will affect the way we experience loss and grief.

## 4. People can and do heal from loss; but, like all healing, it is a journey that takes time.

### How can something be healing if it hurts?

While it is difficult to understand as a child, with experience we can learn the healing value of pain. The sting of antiseptic cleaning a cut. The shivers of cold trying to warm your body through movement. The pains in a muscle as you exercise it to make it stronger.

While these examples are from the physical world, the same is true for loss: **people can and do heal** from the pain of loss and grief. Amazingly, many people also come to talk about grief as an experience of growth.

While this is the case, the healing that happens through grief happens over time rather than in an instant. Therefore, **the healing that happens in grief is a journey.** Knowing the destination does not necessarily make the journey easy, but it does give the journey a purpose.

The journey of healing involves:

**A process.** Healing takes time. There is no set time limit on grief; people must be allowed however long it takes them to go through this process.

**Ups and downs.** Like the body healing, there will be both successes and setbacks. Ups and downs along the journey can be expected.

**Integration.** Even from our earliest years, our experiences of loss are written in as a key part of our life story. Just like a bone reshapes and adjusts as it heals, loss reshapes our lives. Through grief, our losses become a particular chapter written into our life story.

**Sometimes, long term scars.** Even when healing occurs in our bodies, we will always be different because of the injury. Loss, too, can leave scars. These scars can both be difficult to live with, as well as being a sign of the journey we have made.

## 5. Loss often feels like you are powerless and out of control.

Most of us like to sit in the driver's seat of our own lives. We like to have control over the direction we are going. We like to control the speed we are travelling. We like to be able to predict our own journey, to read the signs in our life for ourselves and to respond the way we like to respond.

The experience of loss can feel like being in a car where you suddenly have no control. It is like the steering wheel has been ripped out and the windscreen has been painted over. You might feel like you are speeding up or maybe you feel like you are jerking to a halt suddenly. Things you assumed would always be there are suddenly no longer there. Things you used to be able to predict are now unpredictable.

In this way, **loss threatens our sense of safety and control**, and often leaves us feeling **powerless**. In fact, it is not uncommon for people to say that this is one of the most difficult parts of an experience of loss.

**Different people will react in different ways** to this part of the grief experience, just as people would react in different ways if the steering wheel was suddenly pulled from the car they were driving. It is important to remember that you are used to seeing people when they are travelling smoothly and in control. In an experience of loss, people may think or behave differently to how you have seen them before. Remember that they are likely feeling out of control and powerless, and much of this behaviour should be understandable from this point of view.



# What loss isn't – addressing myths.

The experience of loss and grief is also surrounded by a number of myths that can be unhelpful unless they are addressed.

## **Myth: Grief has a universal structure and timeline.**

This myth suggests that grieving follows a set structure and is generally 'finished' after a certain amount of time. While there are often some common tasks and stages that occur during grief, not every person will approach them the same way, and different people will take different amounts of time to heal through their grief.

## **Myth: It is important to get over grief as soon as possible and move on with your life.**

Encouraging people to 'get over' and 'move on' from their grief is a bit like telling someone just to 'walk off' their broken leg. Grief is actually the process of healing and growth. Ignoring the pain won't make it go away. Allowing it is an important part of healing.

## **Myth: The more you cry, the more you are grieving what you have lost.**

Tears are a very natural and healthy response to loss. However, they are only one response, and different people will find different ways of expressing their grief.

## **Myth: You just need to be strong and you will be fine.**

Loss is part of life, but there is no way of predicting how you will react when you encounter it. Even if you have met many loss experiences in your life, each can be quite unique and can feel just as intense. If your reaction is to feel sad, frightened or hurt, that does not mean you are being 'weak'.

## SECTION 2

# The Personal Experience of Grief.



## Am I normal?

Grief is like heat – you can learn a lot from a description of it, but to go through it is rather different. Reading about feeling powerless and out of control is different from feeling powerless and out of control. The word 'sadness' is different from the feeling of sadness.



Because of this, you may find yourself asking the question: '**Am I normal?**'

The answer to this question is more complex than a simple '**Yes**' or '**No**'.

Loss is a normal life event and grief is a natural reaction to loss. Therefore, to feel grief is one of the most normal and natural things in life.

Still, while you are normal you are also unique. Your experience of grief will be one-of-a-kind.

Loss is a deeply personal experience, therefore it can often feel quite lonely. Those people who experience a loss in a family often find that each family member experiences and deals with the grief of that loss in a different way. Even people that are related may find it hard to understand each other's experience.

This doesn't make how you are dealing with it as wrong. In fact, it shows it is normal to feel unique!

## Factors that influence your experience of grief.

Your personal experience of grief will be unique to you. Some of the things that will affect what ingredients will be present and how they mix together will include:

- **The type of loss you are facing.** Each loss has its own challenges. Whether you are experiencing the death of a loved one, a loss through suicide, a natural disaster, unemployment, or illness, relationship breakdown, these will affect the way you grieve this loss.
- **Gender.** The different genders, both by nature and the way they are nurtured, often have different ways of relating to loss and grief, and these need to be acknowledged when someone is going through these experiences.
- **Past experiences.** What you have experienced so far in life – including your past experiences of loss and grief – will affect the way you grieve.
- **Other things going on in life.** Loss affects the rest of our lives, but it is also true that the rest of our life will affect the way we experience loss and grief.
- **Culture.** The expression of grief and the rituals that surround a loss are often closely tied to one's culture.





## SECTION 3

# Coping with the Two Worlds of Loss.



## What are the two worlds of loss?

When people go through an experience of loss, it is like they are moving between **two worlds**. In one world, they are **dealing with the grief** of what has been lost. This is the 'Lost World'. In the other world, they are **trying to rebuild** their lives and move forward in their healing. This is the 'New World', a world that you are facing without the person or thing that you have lost.

In this way, grief is a bit like moving house. Some of your time is spent at the old house, cleaning up, saying goodbye and moving things out bit by bit. The other part of your time is spent at the new house, moving in, setting things up and getting used to your new surroundings.

You will find that you will move back and forward between these two 'houses' of loss – the grief house and the rebuilding house – as you journey onwards from the loss. It is therefore important to look at ways that you can deal with both the 'Lost World' and the 'New World' as you heal through your grief.





## Working through the 'Lost World'.

Working through the 'Lost World' is like moving out of a house. It is about coming to terms with leaving an old world that you have lived in for much of your life.

Of course, what has changed from the Lost World will be specific to the nature of the loss. Perhaps the world has changed because of a separation in a relationship. Perhaps your world has been turned upside down by someone dying by suicide. Perhaps the world used to be safe and secure before the losses of disaster. Perhaps your world has changed because of unemployment.

Whatever the loss, some of the things in the Lost World that you may have to work through are:

- **Assumptions** about how the world was and how the world was going to be. Through our experience we have theories about what the world is like and predictions about what it is going to be like in the future. In dealing with the Lost World, we often face those assumptions being challenged.

- **Memories** of what has been lost. While we are moving to the 'New World', we can still look back at the Lost World through our memories. These memories might cause you pain or they might bring you peace, but will certainly be part of dealing with the Lost World.
- **'Tidying up'** some of the practical things from the Lost World. When life changes through loss, there are usually practical issues that need to be managed.
- **Longing** for the Lost World to return. One highly common feeling in grief is a sense of longing for what has been lost.

Some things that may help you to deal with the Lost World are:

1. **Officially marking the change.** Often the change from the Lost World to the New World can happen very quickly, therefore it can be important to mark the change between these worlds. This is done through a funeral when someone has died, but it may be equally important to do something similar for other types of loss.
2. **Giving time and space to remember and mourn.** Allow yourself the opportunity to look back into this Lost World. Look at photographs, tell stories, listen to music, go for a walk or sit quietly and think. Sometimes you may wish to do this with others and sometimes you may wish to be by yourself.
3. **Creating the story of the Lost World.** While the Lost World has finished, it is nevertheless a part of your history for the rest of your life. Treat the person or the thing that you lost as a chapter of your life and put together the tale of what that chapter had in your life story.
4. **Realising that you have to move even if you don't want to.** Unfortunately, there is rarely choice involved in loss. An important part of dealing with the Lost World is to acknowledge and accept the reality of the change, even when it is not your choice.

Finally, remember that grief can come in waves. Things might seem calm but then suddenly you might feel the effects of the loss wash over you again. This may be expected (e.g. on an anniversary, birthday or other special date), or it may be unexpected. This is normal and, like a wave at the beach, it will pass.

# Working through the 'New World'.

When a loss occurs in our life it is like moving out of an old world (the world that has been lost) and into a New World.

Moving into this New World has a number of challenges and opportunities:

- **Dealing with things that have changed.** Naturally, things will be different because of the loss you have experienced. There will be some things that are no longer in your life and other things that are still there but have changed. Adapting to these changes is a big part of adjusting to this New World.

- **Things that have stayed the same.** There will be some parts of your life that may not be affected by this loss. Relating to these parts of your world, especially when everything else has changed, can be difficult.

- **Roadblocks in the journey to healing.** As you progress, sometimes there are roadblocks in your journey. These will likely be unique to you and may need some work in dealing with them. Sometimes these roadblocks may be too big to handle on your own and you will need the support of others to get past them (see last section of this booklet for some ideas).
- **Milestones in the journey of healing.** As you travel further into this New World, you will reach certain milestones (e.g. surviving a certain time period after loss, achievements, anniversaries, markers of growth). These are important times in your New World.
- **Recognise the hidden costs you didn't expect.** Like moving house, there will always be surprises in your New World that you didn't expect to find. Recognising and dealing with these as they come up is part of the task of moving forward from the loss.





Some things that may help you navigate this New World may be:

**1. Set yourself milestones.** Look ahead to things that will mark an achievement in your experience of loss. It might be surviving one week after the loss. It might be getting the insurance claim form completed. It might be applying for or being offered a new job. Whatever it is, keep directing your life towards the next milestone.

**2. Getting help with the practicalities.** Adjusting to the New World after the experience of loss can be an overwhelming experience. There are many practical adjustments that need to be made in your life. As much as they want to support you, people around you cannot read your mind and often do not know what they can do to help. Tell them what you need. Remember: there are no prizes for doing it alone, and many hands make light work.

**3. Stay close to what is helping you to heal.** If you have something in your life that is helping you keep your strength, keep doing it! Whether it is your work or a hobby, a club or a religious community, time spent alone or time with friends, if it is helping you heal,<sup>1</sup> keep doing it. Be deliberate in spending time doing these things.

Again, grief is like waves at the beach. Strong waves of grief come but they also go. If you are experiencing a 'calm' time with few, if any, feelings of grief, remember that this is normal as well. You may feel strange or guilty for not feeling sad, but this is as much a part of adjusting to the New World as the sadness is about dealing with the Lost World.



1. Be aware of things that seem like they are helping you heal, but are actually only a quick fix solution. Alcohol and other drugs are a good example. They may make you feel better for a short while; however the pain will still be there when you stop. That makes them a short-term pain-killer, not a long-term healer. Such 'solutions' will only make the grief process more difficult and ultimately, more painful.

# Returning to work and the two worlds of loss.

Never forget that your experience of loss and grief will be as unique as you are. Therefore, your experience of returning to work after a loss will be unique as well.



Many people report a number of **positives about returning to work** after a loss.

Returning to work;

- can give an important sense of **routine**,
- can establish a sense of **normality**,
- can give you a feeling of **achievement and contribution**, and
- can help you feel connected to and supported by your colleagues.

Yet people can also experience difficulties when returning to work.

It is quite common to be worried:

- about how to deal with your **colleagues' reactions** to your loss,
- about needing to **perform** in your job when you might be finding it hard to concentrate and get the best out of yourself, and
- about getting **emotional** (e.g., sad, teary, angry, impatient, frustrated) in front of others.



It is important to **think through your return to work** before you come in on your first day back. Here are some things that might be helpful to think through:

### 1. What might be some of the benefits of going back to work?

Take some time to think of what will be good about returning to work. Keep these in mind as they will give you a reason to persist through difficulties.

### 2. What support might I be able to receive from the workplace?

Find out what support the workplace is able to offer you through contacting your Manager or Human Resource officer. Ask for the support available to help you at this time.

### 3. How do I want to respond to people's reactions to my loss?

People have many reactions to loss. More information is given about this in the next section of this booklet.

### 4. What do I need to communicate to my workplace before I go back to work?

Your return to work will be made much easier if you can communicate with a trusted colleague or supervisor about your loss and grief. In particular, you may need to communicate: (a) your **experience**, i.e. what it is you are going through at the moment (give as much information as you are comfortable sharing), and (b) **expectations**, i.e. what support you hope for from the workplace, and also what expectations the workplace has for you as you return.

### 5. What time and space might I need to make this return to work helpful?

It may be that you need some time to ease yourself back into work. Take time to work out your needs, e.g. days off around the time of the loss, a gradual return to work, extra time off for practical issues or to get support around your grief. Work out what you need and see if you can arrange this with your workplace.



## SECTION 4

# Getting and Receiving Help



## How do I react when people offer help?

A common experience of those returning to work after a loss is having colleagues express sympathy and a desire to help. Many people reflect that this helps them to feel supported and connected. At the same time, it is normal to have **questions** about how to act around people offering help and concern.

A key point to remember is this: this is your loss and your grief and therefore **you have a right to choose** what support you do and don't want. You do not owe anyone anything, so there is no need to put yourself under pressure to keep other people happy.

Given that, some things that might be helpful to consider in responding to other people's reactions to your loss are:

1. Arrange to **communicate** with your colleagues before you return to work. This may be anything from sending an email to fill people in, to arranging to come in and meet with them for lunch one day. Doing this might help to have that initial conversation about the loss before you return to work, so that your first day back might be easier. To also support this transition consider discussing with your manager or Human Resources Officer prior to returning to work how you would like to approach this with your co-workers.
2. **Respond** to your colleagues' sympathy in a way that's comfortable for you. People will often express things in words like "I'm sorry" and "I want to let you know I'm thinking of you". Again, you have a right to respond how you would like. If you do not want to talk about this, a simple "thank you" is all you need to give.
3. **Respond** to offers of help as you would like to respond. Some people may express something like "Let me know if there is anything I can do to help", or "Would you like some help with...". Again, you are in control over whether you would like to take up these offers. If you do not need what they are offering, a polite response of "Thank you, but I'm alright for now" is perfectly acceptable.

A very different reaction to loss that you may see in people is for them to actually not speak to you about the loss and grief that you are going through. This reaction may leave you feeling that these co-workers are a little distant from your experience or do not care. The most common reason people do this is because they are unsure of what to say and are afraid of hurting your feelings.

## When do I seek more help?

Grief is a normal, natural process, but that does not make it easy.

**If you are feeling like your life is becoming too difficult for you to manage because of your grief, it is time to seek some extra support.**

There are many different ways that you can get extra support:

- Make an appointment with a counsellor or psychologist. Counselling is an excellent way to process and work through your grief, particularly if it is becoming difficult to manage. If you don't know how to find

a counsellor or psychologist, speak to your local GP.

- Look for support groups either in your area or online. Connecting with other people who have gone through or are going through a similar experience can be beneficial and strengthening.
- Explore whether your workplace can give you access to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). These programs exist to aide employees in emotional adjustment, and can give you access to resources for support.



# OTHER RESOURCES

## **SuperFriend**

SuperFriend is a national mental health promotion foundation that helps “all profit to member” profit superannuation funds to promote and support improved mental health and wellbeing for their members, through the workplace. SuperFriend aims to reduce the incidence of suicide and the impacts of mental illness on individuals, employers, workplaces, family and friends.

SuperFriend works collaboratively with the mental health sector to develop and promote mental health information, resources, programs and research within workplaces. By improving the understanding of mental health and mental illness in the workplace, SuperFriend influences the policies and practices that foster healthy, supportive work environments.

For further information please visit our website: [www.superfriend.com.au](http://www.superfriend.com.au)

## **Lifeline**

13 11 14 – 24/7 crisis support

Online Crisis Support Chat, information resources & service finder [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

Lifeline is a national charity providing all Australians experiencing a personal crisis with access to 24 hour crisis support and suicide prevention services. Somewhere in Australia there is a new call to Lifeline every minute. Our volunteers answer around 1800 calls everyday. Sadly up to 50 of these calls are from people at high risk of suicide. Suicide remains the leading cause of death for Australians under the age of 44. We all have a role in preventing suicide. Each dollar you give helps us save lives. Need crisis support now? We're here to help. Call 13 11 14 or chat to us online at [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)



# OTHER RESOURCES

## **Employee Assistance Program –**

Check with your manager or HR representative if you have access to an EAP

There are many organisations that provide information, support and services for people experiencing grief, including for specific types of loss. These are just a small selection of organisations who can help. For other services visit Lifeline's website and use the Service Finder to locate services in your local area.

## **Australian Centre for Grief & Bereavement**

[www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au)

## **Australian Psychological Society**

[www.psychology.org.au/community/](http://www.psychology.org.au/community/)

## **Trauma and Grief Network for Indigenous People**

<http://tgn.anu.edu.au/resource/indigenous/>

## **GriefLink**

[www.grieflink.org.au](http://www.grieflink.org.au)

## **Grief Line**

[www.griefline.org.au](http://www.griefline.org.au)

## **Grief in the Workplace**

[www.griefintheworkplace.com](http://www.griefintheworkplace.com)



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