The Journey of Grieving

Yale University Chaplain’s Office
When you lose someone you love, your life becomes strange,
The ground beneath you gets fragile, your thoughts make your eyes unsure;
And some dead echo drags your voice down
Where words have no confidence.

Your heart has grown heavy with loss;
And though this loss has wounded others too,
No one knows what has been taken from you
When the silence of absence deepens.

Flickers of guilt kindle regret
For all that was left unsaid or undone.

There are days when you wake up happy;
Again inside the fullness of life,
Until the moment breaks
And you are thrown back onto the black tide of loss.

Days when you have your heart back,
You are able to function well
Until in the middle of work or encounter,
Suddenly with no warning, you are ambushed by grief.

It becomes hard to trust yourself.
All you can depend on now is that sorrow will remain faithful to itself.
More than you, it knows its way and will find the right time
To pull and pull the rope of grief until that coiled hill of tears
Has reduced to its last drop.

Gradually, you will learn acquaintance with the invisible form of your departed;
And when the work of grief is done, the wound of loss will heal
And you will have learned to wean your eyes from that gap in the air
And be able to enter the hearth in your soul where your loved one
Has awaited your return
All the time.

from To Bless the Space Between Us by John O'Donohue
Some emotions and reactions during your grieving process may include:

- grief that feels all-absorbing
- exhaustion
- social isolation
- loss of appetite
- difficulty sleeping or more tired than usual
- good days and bad days, waves of grief that come and go
- the sense that nothing is right
- forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating
- change in family dynamics
- emotional numbness
- flashbacks
- explosive emotions
- relief
- guilt or confusion
- disbelief
- panic or anxiety
- life feels out of control
- anger
- indifference
Times that can be tough:

Anniversaries

  Birthdays, wedding anniversaries, one-year anniversary of the death, special days in your family

Religious Holidays

  Christmas, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover, Hanukah, Ramadan, Easter, etc.

Other holidays

  Thanksgiving, Valentine’s Day, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day

Special Family Occasions

  Weddings, graduations, bar & bat mitzvahs, reunions, vacations

Academic Calendar

  Start of each semester, midterms & final exams
A Process for Dealing with Grief
adapted from Praying Out Goodbyes by Joyce Rupp

Recognition
Begin by identifying and naming the loss, as well as the hurt or pain that has accompanied it.

Who am I remembering today? How would I describe the place I find myself now?

Reflection
Take time to reflect. Slow down, find solitude or the company of a trusted friend, be still, pray. Try to face the loss rather than staying busy as a way of avoidance.

How will I take time to remember my loved one today? Do I need to spend some time alone, or would conversation with someone else be helpful today?

Ritualization
Create a personal ritual that honors the loss. This may include a symbol of an image, or some kind of movement or activity.

Is there a meaningful place where I have found comfort in the past (nature, a religious site, etc)?

Reorientation
Welcome the healing process, accepting change and new perspectives.

What helps you get up in the morning? What small things have helped you find hope?
When to seek help:

- It is normal to experience some degree of sleeplessness or some diminishing of appetite when in acute grief. If you find you just cannot get out of bed, or if it gets to a point where your physical health is suffering, please seek a doctor’s help.
- Noticeable weight gain or loss
- Difficulty in making or keeping social engagements
- High anxiety, either in intense periods or ongoing
- Continuing flashbacks
- If grief is disrupting your family commitments
- A number of deaths in short succession
- All bad days over weeks and weeks
- If you have suicidal thoughts of any kind
- Increased self-destructive behavior (alcohol, sex, drugs) to avoid grief
- If your normal faith rituals are disturbed (can’t pray, don’t want to go to worship for extended periods of time)
- If grief becomes an obstacle to your work and your love
- When you don’t care about anything
- If you find yourself so consumed by the past that you are unable to make any changes. If after the first year you find you are opposing any and all changes in life, seek the help of others.
- If you don’t know how to interpret your emotional reactions
- Conflict in your relationships
Where to Seek Help:

**Yale Mental Health & Counseling:** Every Yale student is entitled to counseling at the Yale University Health Services (YUHS) Mental Health and Counseling Center completely free of charge, regardless of your health plan. Call (203) 432-0290 for an appointment. Mental health professionals are available 24/7 for emergency and urgent situations. After office hours and on weekends, call (203) 432-0123.

**Yale University Chaplain’s Office:** (203) 432-1128. Call if you would like to talk with a staff member about your journey of grief or any other topic (religious or not), or if would you like help connecting with a local faith community or health professional.

**Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Alanon, Alateen** New Haven Area Answering Service: 203-624-6063 or 1-800-203-1234

**Narcotics Anonymous (NA):** 1-800-627-3543

**Connecticut Hospice:** (203) 315-7500, http://www.hospice.com/

**Breathing Space:** Breathing Space is open for personal prayer and meditation on Sunday from 4:00pm – 10:00pm, Monday to Thursday 9:00am – 10:00pm and Friday from 9:00am – 5:00pm. Breathing Space is located under Entryway C of Welch Hall on Old Campus. Call the Chaplain’s Office for more info: (203) 432-1128.

**Contact your faith community** for other important resources and guidance.
What Now?

the grieving process does not have a script

find a sacred space

try to use the most direct words you can

try writing a letter to the person who has died

try to avoid secrets

eventually you will be able to consider new directions for yourself

light physical exercise: walking or gardening

tender balance: do not change anything until you are ready,

but also do not try to keep everything the same.

ask for help negotiating this.

commemorate your loved one’s memory

try to leave some margins in your schedule so that when the grief really ambushes you, you can take some time to recover

*continued on next page*
sustaining yourself physically:

if it’s difficult to eat – eat what you can

if it’s difficult to sleep – trust your body to rest when it must

if bad news is everywhere – don’t watch the news for awhile

be careful with sleeping pills, alcohol and other sedatives

actively negotiate with your professors regarding deadlines and timing of your work; advocate for your own need to grieve

anticipate difficult dates and consider how to best spend those days: anniversaries, birthdays, weddings, graduations, etc.

try to notice what helps you get through the day, however small
Recommended Reading


The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion, Vintage, 2005.


Death of a Parent:


Death of a Child:

*Empty Arms: Coping After Miscarriage, Stillbirth, or Neonatal Death* by Sherokee Ilse, Wintergreen Press.


Sudden or Tragic Death:


Listen more often to things than to beings; The fire’s voice is heard, Hear the voice of water. Hear in the wind the bush sob: It is the ancestors’ breath.

Those who have died have never left, they are in the brightening shadow and in the thickening shadow; The dead are not under the earth, they are in the rustling tree, they are in the groaning woods, they are in the flowing water, they are in the still water, they are in the hut, they are in the crowd: The dead are not dead.

Listen more often to things than to beings; The fire’s voice is heard, Hear the voice of water. Hear in the wind the bush sob: It is the ancestors’ breath, the breath of dead ancestors who have not left, who are not under the earth, who are not dead. Those who have died have never left, they are in the woman’s breast, they are in the wailing child and in the kindling firebrand. The dead are not under the earth, they are in the fire dying down, they are in the moaning rock, they are in the crying grass, they are in the forest, they are in the home: The dead are not dead.

- by Birago Diop in Life Prayers From Around the World.