

FINDING HOPE

After the Death of Your Loved One



Jason Troyer, PhD

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Jason Troyer, PhD

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Finding Hope

After the Death of a Loved One

By Jason Troyer, PhD



To the reader,

I can't express how sorry I am for your loss. Losses, whether expected or unexpected, can often leave you feeling overwhelmed and hopeless.

I wrote this booklet to provide you with comfort, hope, and information following the death of a loved one. I have provided information about specific challenges after the death of a family member (e.g., spouse, parent, adult child, young child or infant, sibling, etc.) and different types of loss (e.g., traumatic, unexpected, etc.). I have also included information about common grief reactions and responses, strategies for helping yourself, and other topics. I have even more information listed on my website: www.GriefPlan.com.

I hope this booklet will be helpful to you as you mourn the death of your loved one.

Sincerely,

JASON TROYER, PhD

www.GriefPlan.com

Finding Hope After the Death of a Loved One
Jason Troyer

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This book is not designed to replace information from a mental health professional or a physician. The reader should consult an appropriate professional in matters relating to his or her physical and emotional health.

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Challenges Associated with Different Losses

While each loss is unique, the loss of specific relationships can bring up common challenges or reactions. Additionally, the circumstances of the loss (e.g., sudden loss, accidents, suicide, etc.) can create additional burdens. This section will briefly review these types of losses. The “Sources of Additional Help” section later in the booklet provides online resources for support and information. Visit www.GriefPlan.com for recommendations on full-length books related to all of these losses.

Loss of a Spouse or Partner

The loss of a spouse or partner is a common, yet difficult loss.



Because your spouse is often the person with whom you share most of your time, many widowed people report loneliness as one of the biggest challenges. You may have shared similar hobbies, common friends, and parenting responsibilities, as well as a

home, meals, and daily companionship. Therefore, the loss of a spouse is felt constantly. Furthermore, the death of a spouse can remind you of your own mortality because most spouses are close in age.

Additional challenges can result from needing to fill your spouse’s roles (e.g., cooking, cleaning, financial support, communicating with loved ones, etc.). You may also have to deal with your spouse’s extended family and be required to parent your children alone. Reduced emotional affection and physical closeness are other challenges following the loss of a spouse. Many of these concerns also exist for long-term partners who are unmarried and ex-spouses.

Loss of a Parent

For most people, parents serve as the foundation for the rest of their lives. Many children look to their parents for advice, support, guidance, and approval throughout their lives. Upon the death of a parent, a child loses the opportunity to receive these emotional benefits.

You may feel abandoned after the death of a parent even as an adult. It can further complicate matters if you had to make decisions about end-of-life care. The loss of a parent can remind you of the traits and values you have adopted from your parents, as well as the differences you have with them. Furthermore, children of any age may feel pressure to fulfill the roles of the deceased parent. For example, a son may believe that he needs to provide and protect for his mother after the death of his father.

Loss of a Sibling

Along with parents, siblings are usually a key part of our



personal history. You probably have more stories about growing up with your siblings than anyone else. Therefore, the death of a sibling can result in the loss of a shared family history and a close friend.

Unfortunately, others may not fully recognize the impact of

the death of your sibling because most people tend to focus their support on the parents, spouse, or children of the deceased. Given that most siblings are similar in age, the death of a sibling reminds us that death can happen to us. All of these challenges may be compounded if you and your sibling were twins or had an especially close relationship.

Loss of a Grandparent

The death of a grandparent is the first time many people feel the pain of losing a loved one. If this is the first time you have experienced a significant loss, your grief may feel especially confusing and overwhelming. The loss of a grandparent may also result in loss of family history, traditions, and connections with extended family members.

The death of a grandparent can be especially difficult for grandchildren; grandparents often represent unconditional love, acceptance, and fun. Children have varying levels of understanding about death depending on their age and prior experiences with loss. In some families, grandparents may have been active in raising their grandchildren.

Loss of an Adult Child

Parents never believe they will outlive their children. It doesn't



matter if your child is young or an adult — parents never expect to attend their child's funeral. Any parent who experiences the loss of a child — no matter their age — feels like their child's life was cut short. Unfortunately some people focus all of their support on the spouse and children of

the deceased, yet fail to recognize the pain you feel as parents.

Others may also unintentionally diminish your loss by suggesting that you have other children upon whom to focus or that “at least” your child lived to adulthood.

Loss of a Young Child or Teenager

We never expect a young child or teenager to die. The added pain associated with the death of a child or teen is the tragedy of a

life cut short. Although any loss of a child or teen is extremely painful, the loss may be especially overwhelming if it was sudden and unexpected.

Bereaved parents may initially receive a great deal of compassion, but this support can quickly fade. Other parents may avoid you because your loss reminds them of their worst fear — that their child could also die. They also might simply not know what to say. This social isolation can be a long-lasting and painful reminder of your loss. There are also myths associated with the loss of a child. For example, it is important to know that while the death of a child or teen is extremely difficult, it is a myth that bereaved parents have a higher rate of divorce.

The grief associated with the death of a child or teen can often last longer than parents expect, and you may feel that no one else can fully appreciate what you are going through. Therefore, it may be especially helpful to share support with other parents who have experienced the death of a child or teen. The Compassionate Friends is a national organization with community chapters to provide this support.

Pre-Natal Loss & Stillbirth

Unfortunately, many individuals don't recognize the signifi-

cance of prenatal loss or loss during or soon after birth.

Well-meaning people may try to cheer you up by reminding you that you can have more children or that you have other children — as if to suggest the child you lost could be replaced. They assume that



because you did not have much time with your child that you did not have a relationship or connection with your child. This is not true. Every parent begins to develop a relationship with their child

immediately upon finding out they are expecting. This relationship includes your hopes and dreams for the future, thinking about names, plans in preparation for the child, and much more. Do not let anyone suggest that you should not feel grief after the loss of a child (born or unborn). The death of any child is the loss of hopes, dreams, and a future. Therefore, it is a significant loss.

Traumatic Loss (Suicide, Homicide, etc.)

Traumatic losses (including deaths related to suicide, homicide, and other forms of unexpected losses) create several added burdens for the bereaved.



These burdens may include a stigma associated with the loss, decreased support from friends and the community, and the added stress of dealing with media attention. These addi-

tional burdens often cause those bereaved by traumatic causes to suffer in silence and without support. This isolation may be self-imposed by the bereaved or a result of being shunned by friends, extended family, and members of the community.

If your family member died by suicide, you may feel guilt regarding your inability to prevent the death, anger toward the deceased, and shock that it happened. You will likely experience additional challenges if you witnessed the death or discovered your loved one. Furthermore, explaining the cause of a traumatic death to children is especially challenging. Sometimes families will try to keep a suicide or other similar loss a secret. While each family must determine how much information to share with others, it can be stressful to be burdened with this secret and often makes it difficult to participate fully in grief and funeral rituals.

Normal Grief Reactions

Following the Death of a Loved One

There are several common reactions to the death of a loved one including: Sadness, Shock, Disbelief, Avoidance, Guilt, Anger, and Relief. Within certain limits, all of these reactions are normal. Over the next several pages, I will describe these reactions in more detail. If you're concerned that your reactions are not normal, be sure to read the section on "Should I Get Help?"

Sadness: Sadness is the most common response to the death of a loved one. It is common for sadness to last well beyond the first year. For some people, sadness may generally lessen throughout the year, but others will find that it follows no pattern — more like a roller coaster of ups and downs. If you are concerned that your sadness has deepened into depression, see the section: "Should I Get Professional Help?"



Shock: Other than sadness, shock is one of the most common reactions following the death of a loved one. This shock may last a few hours or several weeks, and it is a normal reaction unless it lasts for more than several weeks. Many people don't cry when they are in this state of shock. Let me assure you that not crying in the days and weeks following your loss does not mean that you didn't love your family member. Do not belittle or ridicule yourself if you have been unable to cry. It is common for the bereaved to be busy with planning the funeral and dealing with legal matters; you may not have had time to fully experience the loss of your loved one.

Disbelief: It can often take your mind a while to fully understand that your loved one has died. Most bereaved people experience frequent “disbelief” reactions that are a normal part of the early grief process. These moments of disbelief occur in small ways several times a day. For example, you may hear your phone ring and momentarily think, “That’s my mother calling” before remembering she is gone. Or you may wake up in the morning and reach across the bed as you’ve done a thousand times only to find your husband isn’t laying there. These momentary “lapses” are common, and they are not indications you are avoiding your loss. These are normal reactions to the death of a loved one, and they may happen for many months after the loss.

Avoidance: You may find that you want to avoid thinking about



your loved one. This is also normal. It is unhealthy and unhelpful to either constantly think about your loved one or to always avoid thinking about him or her. It is normal and healthy to take breaks from your grief. You deserve to have time to focus on yourself, your

other loved ones, and the practical challenges that you now face. It does not mean you love your deceased family member any less, and it does not mean you are grieving incorrectly.

Guilt & Anger: Guilt is also a common reaction following the death of a loved one. You may be asking yourself some form of the questions: “What if ...?” “If I had only ...” and “Why didn’t I ...?” These questions are very common and normal. There was likely nothing you could have done to prevent your loved one’s death.

It can be difficult to let go of feelings of guilt. I would simply ask that you show yourself at least as much patience and grace as you would show a friend who is grieving. For example, I assume if

your closest friend was grieving the death of his wife you wouldn't tell him, "Well, if you had just taken better care of her, she wouldn't have died!" Give yourself at least as much kindness as you would show others.

You may also find yourself feeling more angry and irritable than usual. When a loved one dies, sometimes we'd like to think there is someone who should be at fault. This may be especially true when the death is sudden, unexpected, and involves an accident or intentional harm. Of course in some cases, like a negligent surgeon or a drunk driver, your anger will be completely justified.

To heal anger, one must first determine if it is justified or

unjustified. You must ask yourself who you are currently angry with and whether or not it is fair to be angry with them. Furthermore, is it fair to continue to be angry at them? But perhaps the most important question is: What is the anger doing for you? What purpose is



it serving? Anger can be helpful. It may drive you to make changes like starting a charity in your loved one's name or getting a law changed. But anger can only help at the beginning of these changes. It cannot be used to maintain these causes because anger is too destructive to the survivor if it is maintained over a long time. Anger can only be healing if it has been transformed into a desire to help others; eventually charity, grace, and altruism must replace anger as the primary motivators.

Some bereaved individuals are afraid to give up their guilt and anger. They mistakenly assume that if they are no longer experiencing guilt or anger, then they will begin to forget or dishonor their loved one. This simply isn't true. You can continue to honor and remember your family member without the self-destructive effects of long-term guilt and anger. After all, if your loved one

could talk to you, would they want you to live the rest of your life consumed with guilt and anger? Or would they want you to remember and honor them, but also enjoy your remaining years? I know that giving up guilt and anger is easier said than done, but I hope you find you can honor your loved one's legacy without the ongoing burden of guilt and anger.

Relief: There are three common situations where you may feel relief following the death of your loved one: when you were a caregiver, when your loved one had been suffering prior to death, or when the relationship was troubled. You may have been caregiving for your loved one for weeks, months, or years while they were ill, or your loved one may have needed specialized care by others. In these situations it is normal to experience relief — both that your family member is no longer suffering and that you are no longer required to perform caregiving tasks. Some bereaved people experience guilt in association with this relief. They convince themselves they are being selfish for being released from their caregiving role and believe they should not experience any sense of relief. As mentioned in the section on guilt and anger, try to recognize that your loved one would not want you to be consumed with guilt. After all, they have been released from their pain and illness and you should be released from your caregiving duties. This does not mean you love your family member any less.

The other situation where you may feel relief is when your relationship with the deceased was troubled and conflicted. Although we are taught not to speak ill of the deceased, the reality of the situation may be that your family member had numerous faults. You may have loved him or her as a person, but not liked some of their behaviors. To make things more difficult, others may not have known about your family member's faults, and they may speak of them as being more admirable than they really were. In these situations, it can be incredibly helpful to find a trusted friend or professional you can confide in.

Common Grief Reactions

You may have a wide variety of reactions over the weeks, months, and years following your loss. Here are several common grief reactions following the death of a loved one.

- Sadness & Crying
- Guilt & Self Blame
- Helplessness & Shock
- Loneliness & Yearning
- Anger & Irritability
- Fatigue & Lack of Energy
- Insomnia & Restlessness
- Forgetful & Absentminded
- Lack of appetite
- Dreams about the deceased
- Regret
- Relief



Should I Get Professional Help?

First, you should always seek professional assistance if you think



it would be helpful to you. You certainly don't have to be "crazy" or mentally ill to benefit from grief counseling or a support group. Mental health professionals can provide an unbiased perspective and can help you develop strategies for becoming "unstuck" in your

grief. Grief counseling is not a magic potion or a cure for your grief; you won't walk out of your sessions feeling as though your grief has disappeared. But professional assistance can help you better understand your grief and can provide a safe environment for talking about your concerns.

Signs You May Need Professional Help

- You feel that you are “stuck” in your grief in some way
- Your grief has not lessened (or has gotten worse) after several months or a year
- Your feelings of guilt and/or anger have not diminished
- You can’t say your loved one’s name or you won’t allow others to talk about them
- You experience grief, depression, and/or anxiety that impairs your ability to take care of yourself, be effective in your work, or maintain your relationships with others
- You experience thoughts of self-harm or suicide (Always seek help in these situations)
- Your use of alcohol, medications, or illegal substances impairs your ability to be a fully-functioning person

**All of these signs (with the exceptions of thoughts of self-harm or substance abuse) refer to your situation several months after the loss — not immediately after your loved one’s death.*



Common Questions About Grief

This section covers some of the most common questions about grief including the Stages of Grief, the length of grief, achieving closure, grieving “correctly,” and dealing with unusual experiences.

What About the Stages of Grief?

The most widely known theory of grief is Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s Stages of Grief. Her stages, including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, have been frequently depicted in television shows and movies. Given that the Stages of Grief are so

commonly discussed, most people assume they are the “right” way to grieve — but this is incorrect. Many people experience some of these reactions, but there is no evidence that everyone must go through all the reactions, nor should they happen in a specific order. Research and professional experience support the view that grief reactions are very individualized — they do not follow one pattern. So don’t be worried if you don’t feel angry or if you don’t experience denial. Each person’s process of grief is unique, and you shouldn’t try to match your reactions to any specific stage of grief. (If you’re worried that your grief reactions aren’t normal — see the section on “Should I Get Professional Help?”).

How Long Should Grief Last?

Many people expect grief to be something you “get over” in a matter of weeks. In fact, your grief may last a year or more and many feel grief even longer than that. Most bereaved people find their grief eventually lessens, but may also feel that a part of them is always grieving the loss of their loved one.

Although most bereaved people report they are feeling better 1



to 2 years after their loss, this does not mean that grief necessarily follows a pattern of improving each day. Some researchers have found that grief may peak between 4-8 months following the death.

One possible reason for this is bereaved people are often well-supported during the first few weeks after their loved one’s death. However, this support eventually declines after a month or two even though you may continue to feel your grief intensely. Indeed, many well-meaning friends and family members may suggest that your grief should be over within a few months. This simply is not realistic.

Furthermore, most bereaved people report “grief bursts” — moments or days when their grief is especially painful. These bursts

of grief may be due to significant days (e.g., your loved one’s birthday, wedding anniversary, holidays, etc.) or random reminders of your loved one. These “bad days” can also be a result of a new realization or a new “first.” For example, you may have a grief burst on the day you decide to buy a new couch and realize that your loved one won’t be there to go with you. Or you may feel the pain of your loss on the day when your child should have graduated. These reminders may even seem silly to you and others — perhaps the roses in your mother’s garden finally bloomed and you find yourself upset that she didn’t get to witness it. Grief bursts are a normal, although painful, part of grief. Most importantly, experiencing them does not mean that you are regressing or that you are not grieving correctly.

How Do I Achieve Closure or Resolution?

One of the most common questions I get is “How do I get



closure?” I have to admit, I don’t like the term “closure.” I worry that bereaved people who think they should have closure assume the goal of grief is to never again feel sadness or pain about their loved one’s death. For most people, this isn’t a realistic goal. While the

vast majority of bereaved people find they are doing well within a year or two after their loved ones’ deaths, they also report they still feel some grief at times. A more reasonable goal is to get to the point where you are not feeling intense pain every time you think about your family member.

Often grieving individuals have been left feeling that they aren’t grieving correctly or aren’t getting over their losses quickly enough. This is a case where the professionals have been slow to come around to what nonprofessionals have known for a long time. Grief doesn’t get wrapped up. It changes, it evolves, but important losses

are life-changing events. We don't ask newlyweds how quickly they get back to the way they were before getting married; we don't expect new parents to get back to the way things were before they had their first child. Why do we assume we will "get back to" life as it was before the death of a loved one? Life will never be like it was before — no matter how much time elapses. Hopefully the loss won't be as intense as it first was, but professionals are being unreasonable if they expect that bereaved individuals will get back to where they were before.

Is There a "Right" Way to Grieve?

HEART GRIEVERS & HEAD GRIEVERS

There are lots of assumptions about the "best" way to grieve. For many years, most people (including psychologists) assumed the only way to grieve was to express feelings of loss through crying and talking. More recently, grief experts have begun to rethink this assumption. In fact, many individuals adapt well by using other methods.

I believe (and recent research supports) there is no one correct way to grieve. There are some common responses, but grief is highly personal and unique. One view of grief that I support is the idea that there are two general styles of grieving: "heart grievers" and "head grievers." Both ways of expressing grief can be normal and healthy. Heart grievers find comfort in sharing their feelings with others, experience grief very intensely, and express their loss through tears. Most women (but not all) tend to be heart grievers. Conversely, head grievers express their grief through their thoughts and actions, are uneasy crying in front of others, and often focus on solving the problems associated with their loss¹. For example, head grievers may express their grief through taking an active role in planning the funeral, channeling their grief into physical exercise, spending time alone thinking about their loved one, and

¹ *The concepts of heart and head grievers are based on Ken Doka and Terry Martin's concepts of instrumental and intuitive grief styles. See their book, *Grieving Beyond Gender*, for more information.*

choosing specific times when they feel comfortable expressing their feelings. Not surprisingly, men are more likely to be head grievers, but some women also identify with this style. I should note that few people fall completely into one category or the other, and some people will feel comfortable with both styles. Therefore, the best way to grieve is to follow your own natural style: heart or head.

Do I Have to Forget My Loved One?

There is a longstanding grief myth that it is necessary to eventually “let go” or forget the



deceased. We now know that this is not a healthy and adaptive way to grieve. Instead, it is healthy and normal to maintain some “continuing bonds” with your loved one after their death². These bonds may

include thinking and dreaming about them, talking to them and about them, visiting a gravesite or special place, and other ways of feeling connected to your loved one. I believe these different ways of honoring and remembering your loved one can be an important part of the grief process, even if others don’t understand why it is so important.

A note of caution: It is possible to be too heavily invested in your continuing bonds with your loved one — to the point where it interferes with grief and maintaining your relationships with the living. But this is not a common reaction. Most people are able to balance remembering and honoring their loved one while continuing to love the important people in their lives who are still living.

²*For more on this see the book *Continuing Bonds* by Klass, Silverman, and Nickman*



Helping Yourself: Practical Strategies

Be Gentle with Yourself

Give yourself at least as much patience and grace as you would give to a friend or loved one who had suffered the loss of a loved one. We are often much kinder to others than we are with ourselves.

Be Open to Opportunities

Many grieving people are hesitant to be a “third wheel” and turn down opportunities to socialize with others. I would encourage you to accept offers to socialize and dine with others, if you feel like doing so.

Take Care of Yourself

Be sure to eat healthy, exercise, and take care of your physical health. It is common to feel a strange combination of exhaustion and nervous energy, yet also have difficulty falling and staying asleep. Eating well and exercise can help drain some of this restlessness and may help you sleep better.

Express Yourself

It can be helpful to express yourself through creative hobbies or activities. Some examples include sewing, quilting, woodworking, painting, writing poetry, singing, writing stories, or playing an instrument.

Share your Thoughts and Feelings

Setting aside time and space when you feel comfortable talking with others can be incredibly helpful. This may involve talking with a trusted friend or family member, a clergy person, or a therapist. You may want someone to simply listen or to help you solve problems. The nature of these conversations may be different if you are a heart or head griever (see Common Questions about Grief section), but regardless of your grieving style, it can be helpful to gain another person's perspective and support.

Read Books about Other People's Responses to Grief

The death of a loved one can be very isolating. You may not know many others who have experienced the same loss, or you may not feel comfortable talking with others. It can be helpful to read about how others have dealt with the death of their loved ones. Books written by other bereaved individuals can help you feel less lonely and can provide guidance about how to adjust to life without your family member. I have reviewed numerous grief-related books on my website: www.GriefPlan.com.

Engage in Meaningful Rituals and Activities

Many grieving people find it helpful to create meaningful habits and activities. These actions can be large or small, public or private, and symbolize your relationship with your loved one. For example, you may find comfort in going to the cemetery to visit their gravesite. You might decide to donate money in your loved one's name to their favorite charity or organization. More examples of these types of activities are listed in the next section.

Honoring & Remembering Your Loved One

There are many different ways to honor and remember your loved one. The best ways are those that are meaningful to you and your family. Think about what was important to your loved one. What organizations and activities were they committed to? How can you help others remember their contributions and their legacy? But most importantly, what would be helpful for you as you grieve? Below are some ideas to help you begin thinking creatively about ways to honor and remember your loved one.

WAYS TO HONOR AND REMEMBER YOUR YOUR LOVED ONE

1) *Create a photo album, scrapbook, memory book, video montage, or other visual way to remember your loved one.*



Creating a visual reminder of your loved one and your life together can be a wonderful way to honor them. Many individuals find great comfort in reviewing pictures or videos as a way to remember the happy and important moments of life.

2) *Volunteer for or contribute to an organization whose mission you support*

Many grieving people want to do something active as part of their grief response. They feel the need to “do something.” Volunteering at an organization that was meaningful to your loved one or donating money to a cause they cared about can be a way to honor their legacy.

3) Keep a special reminder with you

You may feel extremely lonely after your loved one dies. It may help you to carry something that reminds you of your loved one. For example, you might carry a picture, a significant piece of jewelry (e.g., wedding ring, a special watch, etc.), or something else of significance as a way to continue to feel close to them. Let me assure you that this is a healthy and normal response to a loss.

4) Ongoing Rituals and Moments of Significance

There are many ways that you can continue to feel connected



to your loved one. Examples of daily, weekly, or monthly rituals include saying “good morning” to your loved one’s picture as you get ready for the day, including them in your daily prayers, visiting their gravesite or other important location on a regular basis, and many other

possibilities. Just as your relationship with your loved one was built upon many daily interactions, so too can your connection be maintained with small, but significant moments of remembrance.

A Final Word of Hope

While no words can take away your grief, I hope this booklet has provided you with information and comfort. I want to remind you that grief takes many different forms and it may resurface at seemingly random times. In addition to these moments of pain, you will eventually have unexpected pleasant memories. For example, you may smile whenever you drive by a specific park because it reminds you of picnics there with your loved one. For most people the ache of grief does lessen over time.

My hope is that you are surrounded by supportive loved ones as you grieve the death of your family member and that eventually your happy memories endure longer than the sad ones.

With sincerest condolences,

JASON TROYER, PHD

www.GriefPlan.com



About the Author



Dr. Jason Troyer is the creator of [GriefPlan.com](https://www.griefplan.com). In his professional experience as a therapist, grief researcher, and professor, he discovered that grieving people wanted a plan to help them on their grief journey. His GriefPlan Programs include videos, information, activities, writing prompts, and other tools to guide people to heal, remember, and rebuild after loss. Dr. Troyer also offers 1-on-1 GriefPlan Coaching for those who want additional help. He provides engaging presentations and workshops on a variety of grief-related topics. Dr. Troyer earned his doctorate in Counseling Psychology and masters in Counseling. You can contact Dr. Troyer at [GriefPlan.com](https://www.griefplan.com).

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Heal • Remember • Rebuild

With Dr. Jason Troyer



Feeling Lost & Stuck in Your Grief?



I guide you through a plan to heal, remember, & rebuild after loss

- **Free Videos & Resources**
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