

FINDING HOPE

A Year Later



Jason Troyer, PhD

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Finding Hope

A Year Later

By Jason Troyer, PhD



To the reader,

I can't express how sorry I am for your loss. While I hope that your grief has lessened over the past year, I want you to know that it is common and normal to still feel grief. Most people continue to feel that there is a hole in their life even a year later.

I wrote this booklet to provide you with comfort, hope, and information as you continue to transition to a life without your loved one. I have included information on common questions about grief, preparing for the anniversary of your loved one's death, and other topics. If you are wondering if your reactions are unusual or unhealthy, this booklet will help answer these questions. Feel free to use the table of contents to skip around and find answers and support for your specific concerns. I have even more information listed on my website: www.GriefPlan.com.

I hope this booklet will be helpful to you as you continue to remember your loved one.

Sincerely,

JASON TROYER, PhD

www.GriefPlan.com

Finding Hope A Year Later
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.

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

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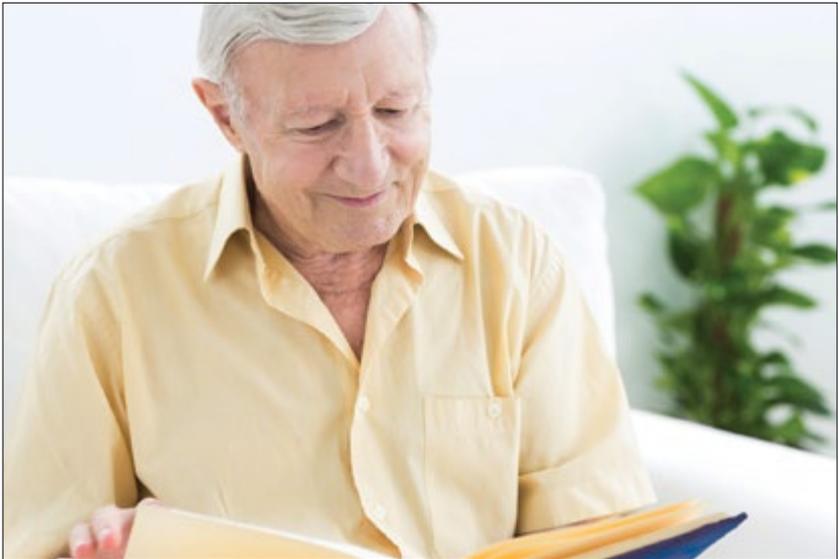
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As the Anniversary Approaches

It is normal for you to think of your loved one as the anniversary of their death approaches. You may feel more grief during this time, but this does not mean that you are “backsliding” or regressing. Some people are very aware of the specific date of their loved one’s death. For others, a specific season or holiday may be associated with the loss. For example, if your loved one died in early October, you may associate their death with the cooler temperatures or the changing leaves of autumn.

Many people are concerned about how they will react on the anniversary of the loss. I recommend that you have a specific plan for that day. Having a plan can help you feel like you have more control. Furthermore, you can use part or all of the day to honor your loved one. This doesn’t mean that you have to schedule something to fill every minute of the day. In fact, one positive thing about planning the anniversary is that you can set aside part of the day to remember your loved one, yet also find some enjoyment in the day.



Here are some ideas for preparing for the anniversary:

- Decide who (if anyone) you want to spend time with on the anniversary and make plans with them in advance. Be sure to let your companions know your plans and how important this day is to you.
- Do something to honor the deceased. This may include visiting their gravesite, visiting a place that was special to them, volunteering for a cause they supported, enjoying food and drink they liked, spending time in reflection or prayer, writing in a journal, or other activities.
- After spending time honoring the deceased, do something that you enjoy. This activity may even be a distraction from your grief. You may choose to spend time with family, go for a drive, go to the movies, exercise, eat at a favorite restaurant, create or build something, go for a walk or hike, or spend time with babies, children, or animals.



In short, you should approach the day with a plan that allows you to both honor the deceased as well as take care of yourself. Generally speaking, I don't recommend spending the entire day either focused on the deceased or distracting yourself. Some balance of these two perspectives is more helpful for most people. Furthermore, planning at least a portion of the day will help you feel more prepared and less overwhelmed.

Am I Normal? Common Questions About Grief

This section covers some of the most common questions about grief including the length of grief, the Stages of Grief, achieving closure, and different grieving styles. Throughout the year after a loss, many bereaved individuals ask themselves questions like these:

- Am I crying too much? Am I not crying enough?
- Is it okay to laugh and feel happy again?
- What should I do with the personal items of my loved one?
- Should I be thinking more or less about my loved one?
- I think I want to have some new relationships — is that appropriate?
- Should I be feeling something different? Should I be doing something different?



Essentially, these are different ways of asking the same question: Am I normal?

This is a common concern. I wish there were easy answers to these questions — but there aren't. Each individual is unique. Let's review some of the most common concerns that bereaved individuals have.

Is My Grief Taking Too Long?

People grieve at different rates and there is no timetable for how long one should experience grief. Because our society tends to expect people to recover quickly after a loss, many bereaved people assume that they are not grieving quickly enough. I believe it is

more important to examine your ability to continue to accomplish the important tasks of living. For example, are you able to keep yourself and your living space clean? Are you able to maintain your physical health? After a few weeks or months, are you able to return to work or other important tasks?

You'll notice that I don't say anything about how frequently you



cry or how often you think about your loved one. You may find that you are able to return to work and your daily tasks, but also find yourself frequently thinking about the deceased. Perhaps you regularly cry when you think of them. These are not indications of whether or not you are grieving correctly, these are simply the ways that you are grieving your loss.

I don't have a specific answer for the question, "How long should grief take?" But it is normal to feel grief after the death of a close loved one for several months to a few years. In most cases your grief should not feel as intense a year after your loss. However, you may feel your grief fluctuate throughout the first year based on various reminders, stress, significant days (anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, etc.), and other factors.

Did I Rush Through My Grief Too Quickly?

Perhaps you are concerned that you rushed through your grief too quickly. (Or perhaps your family or friends think that your grief didn't last long enough). Sometimes this is because you grieve in a very private way and others don't know what you do or how often you think about your loved one. Perhaps your grief process is one that does not take as long as others.

Individuals who anticipate a loved one's death may have shorter periods of grief. Perhaps your loved one experienced a long illness and you had time to prepare for their death. Thus, your grief actually started long before your loved one's death. Furthermore, your grief may be balanced by knowing that your loved one is no longer suffering.

Only you can assess your grief process fairly and determine if you have rushed through it too quickly. Signs that you may have hurried the process include: not wanting to ever think or talk about the deceased, not having private moments of reflection on what has been lost, and trying to convince yourself or others that nothing has changed in your life. These may be signs that you are avoiding your loss and you may benefit from professional assistance.

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. Over the last year you may have experienced some of these reactions. However, 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. Don't be worried if your grief hasn't followed these particular stages. Each person's process of grief is unique.

How Do I Achieve Closure or Resolution?

Now that it is a year after your loss, you might think that you should have closure. That depends on what you mean by "closure." Some people assume that closure means they will never again feel sadness or pain regarding their loved one's death. For most people,

this is not a realistic goal. While the vast majority of bereaved people find they are doing much better within a year or two, 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 loved one.

It is normal if you still occasionally cry or feel grief. Our society often tries to rush the grieving process and condense it to days or weeks instead of months and years. While your grief should not be as intense as it was immediately following the death, continuing to think about your loved one and occasionally feeling grief and sadness are completely normal.

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 loss.¹ 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 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 (heart and head).

Over the past year, I hope that you have discovered your own style of grief. If you have felt misunderstood by your family and friends, perhaps it is because you have a different grieving style than they do. Maybe you wanted to spend time alone or participate in meaningful activities (head grieving style), while they were more

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.*

comfortable talking and sharing their feelings (heart grieving style). Ultimately, I hope your family and friends have supported you in whichever style you feel comfortable.

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 death.² 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 them. 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 the deceased — to the point where it interferes with grief and maintaining your relationships with the

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

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.

What about “Unusual” Experiences?

Some bereaved individuals have contact or communication with their deceased loved one. These experiences may include hearing the voice of the deceased, seeing their image, sensing their presence nearby, or having life-like dreams about them. Widows and widowers are even more likely to have these experiences. Most bereaved people find these experiences to be comforting and meaningful — even if they are a bit surprising. Many people are hesitant to share these events for fear they will be viewed as having a psychological disorder or dementia. Let me reassure you that the vast majority of these experiences are a normal part of the grieving process.



Common Grief Reactions

You may have experienced a wide variety of reactions over the past year. 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



Normal Reactions Throughout the First Year

There are several common reactions to the death of a loved one that may occur throughout the first year and longer. Some of these reactions include: Sadness, Shock & Disbelief, 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 Professional 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. Experiencing sadness does not mean that you aren't grieving correctly. However, your sadness should not be as intense and persistent as it was earlier in the year. If you are concerned that your sadness has deepened into depression, see the section: “Should I Get Professional Help?”



Shock & Disbelief

Other than sadness, shock and disbelief are common reactions following the death of a loved one. Shock and disbelief occur during the first hours, days, and perhaps weeks after the death; it is atypical for you to still feel an intense sense of shock or disbelief a year after the death. If you are frequently struggling with accepting the reality that your loved one has died, it can be helpful to seek professional assistance.

Anger

You may have found that you were more angry and irritable over the last year. When a loved one dies, sometimes we would 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? As you look back over the last year have you spent a lot of time and energy being angry about something that cannot be changed? While there are situations where it is normal to be angry, your anger should never overwhelm your grief process.

The next steps in healing your anger are to find answers to these key questions: 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.

If anger is so damaging, then why is it so difficult to give up? Some individuals mistakenly assume that if they are no longer experiencing anger, then they will begin to forget or dishonor their deceased loved one. This simply isn't true. You can continue to honor and remember your loved one without the self-destructive effects of long-term anger. After all, if they 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 anger is easier said than done, but I hope you find you can honor your loved one’s legacy without the ongoing burden of anger.

Guilt

Guilt is also a frequent reaction following the death of a loved one. Throughout the last year you may have struggled with questions such as “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. Guilt also arises if you were a caregiver for your loved one before their death and now feel relief from the burden of taking care of them. It is normal to experience relief in this situation — both that your loved one is no longer suffering and that you are no longer required to perform caregiving tasks.

As more time goes on, you may struggle with a different challenge — that of experiencing guilt for feeling happiness and continuing on with your life. But continuing to live and enjoy life is not dishonoring your loved one. It is healthy and normal to enjoy life, go on trips, form new relationships, and experience other positive



changes. Continuing with your life does not mean that you can't maintain a connection with your loved one. (Be sure to read the section "Do I Have to Forget My Loved One?") I believe that living life to the fullest is one of the best ways to honor your loved one's memories.

Relief

There are two common situations where you may feel relief



following the death of your loved one: when they were suffering or when the relationship was troubled. Your loved one may have been suffering for weeks, months, or years. In these situations it is normal to experience relief because they are no longer suffering. As mentioned in the previous

section, some people feel guilt in association with this relief. Feeling relief does not mean you don't care about your loved one; it simply means that you recognize their pain has ended.

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 loved one had numerous faults. You may have loved them as a person, but not liked some of their behaviors. To make things more difficult, others may not have known about your loved one's faults, and they may speak of them as being more admirable than they really were. Feeling relief in these situations is normal; it is possible to love and honor the deceased without missing some of their negative behaviors or traits.

Should I Get Professional Help?

First, you should always seek professional assistance if you think it would be helpful to you. Even if you have not previously attended a support group or counseling, you can still take advantage of them. There are several reasons why a support group or counseling would be helpful around the anniversary of your loss. One reason is that the intensity of your grief may intensify as the anniversary approaches. Also, you may find that your friends and family are no longer as supportive as they were initially. Members of grief support groups and mental health professionals may better understand your long-term needs. Another reason you may benefit from professional assistance is that the death of a loved one may trigger previous problems. For example, if you have struggled with anxiety, depression, substance abuse, or other mental health concerns in the past, a significant loss may cause these concerns to resurface.

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. Although grief counseling is not a magic potion or a cure for your grief; it can help you better understand your grief and can provide a safe environment for talking about your concerns.

There are several places where you can get help. Organizations in many communities offer grief groups. These are groups for people who have suffered a recent loss. The group may be led by a therapist, clergy/minister, or previously widowed person. Each group is different. If the first group you attend is not helpful, I would encourage you to try again. You may find another group that fits your needs and personality better. You can find a list of local grief groups by viewing online and newspaper listings or by contacting your funeral director or local hospice organizations. I have also listed several resources at the end of this booklet including online resources and telephone hotlines.

You may decide that you want private, individual assistance. Professional therapists (e.g., professional counselors, clinical social workers, psychologists) can assist you with your grief. Grief counseling is often a very personal process. Therefore, you want to be sure you are working with a professional who is taking your concerns seriously and with whom you feel comfortable. If you don't feel this, don't hesitate to change to someone else.



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.*

Honoring & Remembering Your Loved One

There are many different ways to honor and remember your loved one. You may have already carried out some of these suggestions over the past year. However, I have provided this list because you may be looking for some different ways to honor your loved one, or perhaps you are finally ready to try some of these strategies.

Feel free to tailor each suggestion to your own needs. The best ways to honor a loved one 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 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. Remember that grief can take a variety of different forms, and there are many healthy ways to express your grief. You should be proud of the resilience and strength that you have shown over the past year. I hope that you have begun to heal and experience the happiness and joy life has to offer.

My hope is that you have begun to find balance between remembering your loved one and continuing with life 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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With Dr. Jason Troyer



Feeling Lost & Stuck in Your Grief?



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

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- **GriefPlan:** Heal, Remember & Rebuild Online Program
- **Grief Coaching:** 1-on-1 Support

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