

Understanding Grief: for adults, teens, and children

Recorded: January 21, 2026

Transcript

Dr. Erin Gallagher: Grief, in the most simple terms, is a natural response to losing something or someone, or even the threat of losing something or someone that is important to us.

Understanding grief, of course, is much more complicated as its expression, or the response it elicits, is so heavily influenced by social or cultural norms and values.

When we lose someone important to us, we often grieve well before the actual loss, unless the loss is sudden. We bear witness to the dwindling of the story we envisioned for ourselves and our loved one, as well as the meaning behind those future plans. Many secondary losses occur beyond the physical presence of the person.

Grief can also be delayed, often as a conscious or even subconscious mechanism for moderating the intense emotions that can come with it.

Although grief is a natural response, one thing I know for sure is that everyone experiences it differently.

Grief does not disappear because the love we have for the person never disappears over time; however, grief is carried differently by us all. It becomes lighter and allows us to experience joy again and adapt to the world with newfound meaning.

An individual's expression of grief is unique and influenced by many factors: their culture, temperament, age, supports, past experiences, the context of the current loss, and so much more.

In adults, there is perhaps the largest variability in the process of grief. Children, on the other hand, may experience bursts of grief showing intense emotions, separation anxiety, or regression in behaviours interspersed with seemingly normal and playful periods of behaviour. Teenagers may express emotional lability and only feel comfortable opening up to their peers, often worried about how the loss may impact their future.

Grief is rarely experienced in a straight line. It has been described as coming in waves, a roller coaster, or a chaotic ball of yarn. Grief also affects every part of us. It can affect our emotions with feelings of sadness, shock, irritability, anger, anxiety, and guilt, to name a few.

It can affect our cognition through increased fatigue, lack of concentration, and inability to cope. It can affect our behaviours, interfering with sleep, appetite, and the desire to pursue activities or be around other people.

Grief can affect our bodies with symptoms of stomach upset or headaches. It can also affect our beliefs, such as our sense of security, making sense of the world, and even our faith.

Despite being a natural process, 1 in 10 people experience prolonged grief. Prolonged grief is a social construct describing someone who remains stuck in or preoccupied with their grief, preventing them from living their life and functioning at a level that is acceptable to them or to cultural norms. Often, this comes with a lack of joy, a lack of meaning, or even purpose in life. At its most severe, it can result in severe depression or suicidal thoughts and intent.

There are many risk factors for prolonged grief, including but not limited to: sudden or violent death; loss of a child at any stage of development; loss of someone you were highly dependent on or were a caregiver for for a prolonged period of time; finding someone deceased; a lack of appropriate supports or social isolation; and strained relationships.

Unrecognized or disenfranchised grief is another risk factor for prolonged grief. This can happen when there is stigma around the circumstances of a death, such as a suicide, an overdose, or even a murder. This can also occur when children are sheltered from the grieving process, when the loss is not recognized socially as significant (such as the loss of a pet), or when the expression of grief is not culturally appropriate, when your social circle is not capable or comfortable of responding to grief in ways that are helpful.

There are great resources online for people of all ages and abilities for young children. Maintaining routines and the three Cs are foundational. Knowing how they will be **cared** for, knowing that death is not **contagious**, and that they did not **cause** the death of a loved one.

For teens who may be more hesitant, it's important to ensure they know the door is always open to talk and express themselves, even if they don't know what to say.

Grief is a normal part of living, and role modelling healthy approaches for young age groups sets our children up for success. For age-appropriate resources, check out KidsGrief.ca, YouthGrief.ca or the Children's Grief Foundation of Canada. Mygrief.ca is another great online resource for general grief topics, specific types of losses, specific populations, and cultural resources. A wide array of community resources exist as well, including your primary care provider or mental health team, grief and bereavement groups, hospice programs, funeral homes, employee assistance programs, and libraries for literature and seminars.

When a death has not yet occurred, these resources can be just as valuable. For example, there are counsellors trained in legacy therapy who can help a client represent their legacy through creative means, such as writing letters, creating music, or future gifts.

If you are worried about the level of grief that you are experiencing or that somebody you know is experiencing, please reach out to a healthcare professional to get the help that you need.

DISCLAIMER: The information in this video was accurate as of the upload date, 1/21/2026. This transcript has been provided for informational purposes only. They are not a substitute for advice from your own health care professional. This transcript may be reproduced for not-for-profit educational purposes only. Any other uses must be approved by the McMaster Optimal Aging Portal (info@mcmasteroptimalaging.org).