



Understanding Grief: Waves, Not Stages

A gentle guide to what grief really looks like

If you're holding this page, you've lost someone or something that mattered. I'm so sorry. Nothing on paper can take that hurt away. But I hope this helps you understand what's happening inside you, and reminds you that you're doing this right, even when it doesn't feel that way.

What grief is

The writer Jamie Anderson said it best: "Grief is just love with no place to go." All the care you poured into someone (the calls, the habits, the plans) doesn't disappear when they do. For a while, it comes out as pain. That's not something broken in you. It's proof of how much they mattered.

And grief isn't only about death. We grieve divorces, friendships, health, homes, jobs, the future we thought we'd have. If it mattered to you, it's allowed to hurt.

It doesn't come in tidy stages

You may have heard about the "five stages of grief." Here's what research actually shows: grief doesn't move in order, and it doesn't follow a schedule. It comes in waves. You can have a calm morning, and then a song in the grocery store knocks the wind out of you. That's not going backward. That's how grief works.

Over time, the waves usually come farther apart and get easier to stand in. But they can still arrive years later, on birthdays and on ordinary Tuesdays. There's no deadline, and there's no wrong way to do this.

The wide range of normal

People are often worried by their own reactions to loss. So let me say this clearly: almost everything you're feeling is a normal response to losing something you loved. That includes:

Numbness: feeling nothing at all, or watching your life through glass. Numb is a feeling too, and it often comes first.

Relief: especially after a long illness or a hard relationship. Relief and love can live side by side. Feeling it doesn't mean you loved them less.

Anger: at the person, at doctors, at God, at yourself, at people whose lives just kept going.

Body changes: exhaustion, brain fog, appetite changes, aches. Grief lives in the body too.

Moments of laughter or joy: these aren't betrayals. They're part of it.

None of these need fixing. They need room.

It's healthy to take breaks from grieving

Healthy grieving is not feeling sad every minute. Research shows people naturally move back and forth: some hours go to the loss (crying, remembering, missing) and other hours go to living (working, cooking dinner, laughing at something silly on TV). Both halves are the work.

If you felt okay today and then felt guilty about it, please hear me: feeling okay is not forgetting. You're allowed to set grief down and pick it back up. It will wait, and so will your love.

Small things that help

None of these are required, and none of them rush the process. They just make the waves a little easier to stand in.

- 1.** Let your body be cared for. Sleep when you can, eat something, step outside. Grief is physical work, and it needs fuel.
- 2.** Say their name. Tell a story about them. Keeping them in the conversation often hurts less than keeping them out.
- 3.** Let people do the small stuff: meals, rides, errands. "Yes, thank you" is a complete sentence.
- 4.** Keep one or two gentle routines, like a morning walk or a set bedtime. Routines give the waves something to land against.
- 5.** Plan for the hard dates: anniversaries, holidays, birthdays. Light a candle, or spend them with someone kind, so they don't catch you alone.

If you like to write

Writing helps some people and not others. Both are fine. Keep it small and close to today. And if writing pulls you somewhere that feels like too much, you can stop mid-sentence and close the notebook. The heavier rooms of grief are easier to enter with someone beside you. That's what our sessions are for.

1. What do I miss most today? "Today" keeps it small; you don't have to sum up the whole loss.
2. What do I want to remember and keep? Maybe a phrase they used, a recipe, or the way they answered the phone.
3. What has been holding me up lately, even a little? People, places, habits. Noticing them helps them keep working.

When grief may need extra support

Grief itself is not an illness, and it doesn't need to be treated away. But sometimes it gets stuck, and extra support makes a real difference. Please reach out to me, or to any counselor, if months have passed and you notice:

You can't manage daily life (work, kids, meals, bills) and it isn't easing.

The loss feels as raw as day one, and nothing else can get in.

You're avoiding everything that reminds you of them, and your world keeps shrinking.

Hopelessness has settled in: a sense that life can't ever be good again.

And if you ever have thoughts of not wanting to be here, that deserves care right away. The number at the bottom of this page exists for exactly that.

Asking for help with grief isn't failing at it. Some losses are too heavy to carry alone — they were never meant to be.

There is no version of this you're doing wrong. Bring any of it to our next session: the waves, the numbness, the guilt about laughing. We'll hold it together.

This handout is a companion to therapy, not a replacement for it: a small support to keep in your pocket between our sessions. If you're in crisis, call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), any time, day or night.