

# Developmental Responses to Grief

from The Dougy Center: The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

## Ages 2-4 years old

### **Developmental stage**

Children this age don't fully understand that death is permanent and universal. They are most likely to express themselves through their behavior and play.

### **Concept of death**

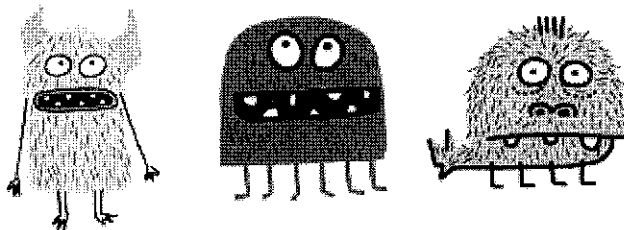
Young children see death as reversible and are starting to wonder if death happens to everyone. You might hear questions like: "My mom died? When will she be home?" and "Will you die too? What about me?"

### **Common responses to grief**

- General anxiety
- Crying
- Irregular sleep
- Clinginess/need to be held • Irritability
- Temper tantrums
- Telling the story to anyone, including strangers
- Repetitive questions
- Behavior regression – may need help with tasks they've already learned

### **Ways to help**

- Create a consistent routine to re-establish safety and predictability, especially around starting and ending the day.
- Provide short, honest explanation of the death. "Mommy died. Her body stopped working." Use the words dead and died. Avoid euphemisms such as gone, passed on, lost.
- Answer questions honestly.
- Set limits but be flexible when needed.
- Provide opportunities for play.
- Give choices whenever possible. "Do you want hot or cold cereal?"
- Offer lots of physical and emotional nurturance.



## Ages 5-8 years old

### **Developmental stage**

Children this age are exploring their independence and trying tasks on their own. They are very concrete thinkers, with a tendency towards magical/fantasy thoughts.

### **Concept of death**

In this age range, children often still see death as reversible. They can also feel responsible and worry that their wishes or thoughts caused the person to die. They may say things like: "It's my fault. I was mad and wished she'd die."

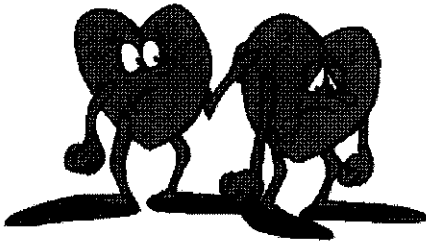
### **Common responses to grief**

- Disrupted sleep, changes in eating habits
- Repetitive questions – How? Why? Who else?
- Concerns about safety and abandonment
- Short periods of strong reaction, mixed with acting as though nothing happened
- Nightmares
- Regressive behaviors – may need help with tasks they've already learned (can't tie shoes, bedwetting)
- Behavior changes: high/low energy, kicking/hitting
- Physical complaints: stomachaches, headaches, body pain

### **Ways to help**

- Explain the death honestly using concrete language. "Daddy's heart stopped working." Use the words dead and died. Avoid euphemisms such as gone, passed on, lost.
- Be prepared for repetitive questions.
- Provide opportunities for big energy and creative play.
- Allow children to talk about the experience and ask questions.
- Offer lots of physical and emotional nurturance.
- Give choices whenever possible. "Your room needs to be cleaned. Would you like to do it tonight or tomorrow morning?"





## Ages 8-12 years old

### **Developmental stage**

Elementary school age children may still be concrete thinkers, but are beginning to understand abstract ideas like death and grief. They often start making closer connections with friends and activities outside their home and family.

### **Concept of death**

Children this age begin to understand that death is permanent and start thinking about how the loss will affect them over the long-term. Some children will focus on the details of what happened to the body of the person who died. Feelings of guilt and regret can lead to concern that their thoughts and actions made the death happen.

They may say or think things like: "If I had done my homework, my teacher wouldn't have died." or "I think it was my fault because I was mean to my brother."

### **Common responses to grief**

- Express big energy through behavior sometimes seen as acting out
- Anxiety and concern for safety of self and others - "The world is no longer safe" • Worries about something bad happening again
- Difficulty concentrating and focusing
- Nightmares and intrusive thoughts
- Physical complaints: headaches, stomach aches, body pain
- Using play and talk to recreate the event
- Detailed questions about death and dying
- Wide range of emotions: rage, revenge, guilt, sadness, relief, and worry
- Hypervigilance/increased sensitivity to noise, light, movement, and change
- Withdrawal from social situations

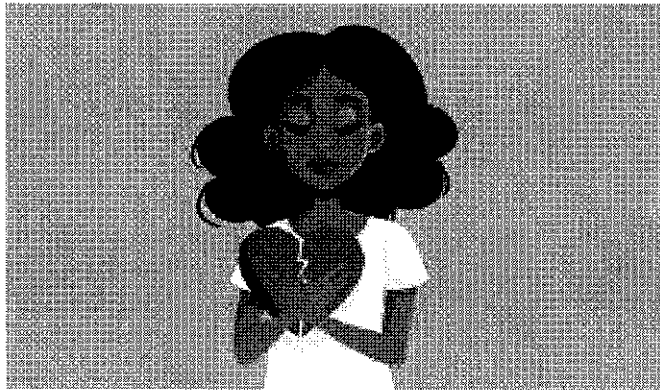
### **Ways to help**

- Inform yourself about what happened. Answer questions clearly and accurately. Even though children this age are starting to grasp abstract thought, it's still helpful to use the words dead and died and avoid euphemisms such as gone, passed on, lost, expired.
- Provide a variety of activities for expression: talk, art, physical activity, play, writing.
- Help children identify people and activities that help them feel safe and supported.
- Maintain routines and limits, but be flexible when needed.
- Give children choices whenever possible, "Would you rather set the table or put away the dishes after we eat?"
- Work to re-establish safety and predictability in daily life.
- Model expressing emotions and taking care of yourself.
- Be a good listener. Avoid giving advice (unless they ask for it), analyzing, or dismissing their experiences.
- Talk with teachers about providing extra support and flexibility with assignments.
- Seek professional help for any concerns around self-harm or suicidal thoughts.

## **Ages 13-18 years old**

### **Developmental stage**

Teens are cognitively able to understand and process abstract concepts about life and death. They begin to see themselves as unique individuals, separate from their role in the family and may wrestle with identity and who they want to be in the world. There can be significant changes in their priorities, spirituality/faith, sexuality, and physical appearance. Teens often rely on peers and others outside the family for support.



### **Concept of death**

While teens understand death is permanent, they may have unspoken magical thoughts of the person being on a long trip, etc. They may also delve into questions about the meaning of life, death, and other traumatic events.

### **Common responses to grief**

- Withdrawal from family or other support networks/focused on connections with peers
- Increased risk taking: drugs/alcohol, unsafe behaviors, reckless driving
- Inability to concentrate (school difficulties)/pushing themselves to succeed and be perfect
- Difficulty sleeping, exhaustion
- Lack of appetite/eating too much
- Unpredictable and at times intense emotional reactions: anger, sadness, guilt, relief, anxiety
- Uncomfortable discussing the death or their experiences with parents and caregivers
- Worry about safety of self and others
- Fear about death or violence happening again
- Confusion over role identity in the family
- Attempts to take on caregiving/parent role with younger siblings and other adults
- May have thoughts of suicide and self-harm
- Hypervigilance/increased sensitivity to noise, movement, light

### **Ways to help**

- Reinforce assurances of safety and security, even if teens don't express concerns.
- Maintain routines and set clear expectations, but be flexible when needed.
- Allow for expression of feelings without trying to change, fix, or take them away.
- Answer questions honestly.

- Provide choices whenever possible. "I'd like to do something to honor your dad's birthday, would you like to be part of that? What ideas do you have?"
- Adjust expectations for concentration and task completion when necessary.
- Assist teens to connect with support systems, including other adults (family, family friends, teachers, coaches). • Model appropriate expressions of grief and ways to take care of yourself.
- Ask open ended questions ("What is it like for you?") and listen without judging, interpreting, advising, or placating.
- Have patience with teens' wide range of reactions and questions.
- Seek professional help for any concerns around self-harm or suicidal thoughts.



***Our Mission***

The Dougy Center provides support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families grieving a death can share their experiences.

***The Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources***

The Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 30,000 Dougy Center participants over the past three decades. To order online, visit [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org) or [www.tdcbookstore.org](http://www.tdcbookstore.org) or call 503.775.5683.



## Resources!



The Dougy Center: <https://www.dougy.org>

Judi's House for Grieving Children and Families:  
<https://judishouse.org>

National Alliance for Children's Grief:  
<https://childrengrieve.org>

Hospice Foundation of America:  
<https://hospicefoundation.org>

Lighthouse for Grieving Children: Peer support for Grieving Children, Youth, and their Families  
<https://www.grievingchildrenlighthouse.org/index.php>

Sesame Street in Communities: <https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/grief/>

### Articles/blogs/classes:

<https://whatsyourgrief.com>

<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/10/07/1043881136/covid-deaths-leave-thousands-of-u-s-kids-grieving-parents-or-primary-caregivers>

<https://www.npr.org/2019/04/24/716702066/death-talking-with-kids-about-the-end>

<https://www.aiu.edu/Student%20Resources/Student/IICCMay2011.pdf>

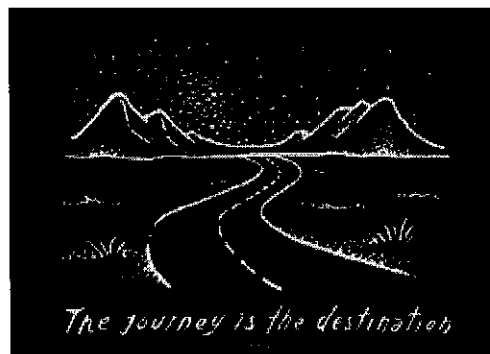
<https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/understanding-grief-and-loss-in-children.pdf?sfvrsn=8&sfvrsn=8>

<https://www.hopeandgrief.com>

[https://indianmentalhealth.com/pdf/2020/vol7-issue1/6-Review-Article\\_Grief-children.pdf](https://indianmentalhealth.com/pdf/2020/vol7-issue1/6-Review-Article_Grief-children.pdf)

[https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Grief-008.aspx](https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Children-And-Grief-008.aspx)

<https://www.childrenandyouthgriefnetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Overview-of-Literature-Review.pdf>



## 10 needs of a grieving child

\*Adapted from the work of grief expert Donna Schurman, Ed.D\*



- **Healthy models of grief.** An adult who is grieving can model that it's ok to feel a wide variety of experiences related to grief and it's ok to ask for help. Share your feelings with grieving children
- **Truth.** Answer a child's questions about loss. Share information in a simple, direct, accurate, and age appropriate manner. Children can feel lied to when adults withhold information from them. Be sure to share an age appropriate version of the truth. Children who are grieving need to be able to trust the adults around them to understand them and be honest with them. Follow the child's lead as giving too much information can also be overwhelming.
- **Stability, consistency, and predictability.** Children who are grieving often feel more in control when they know what to expect and are in a routine. Grief brings many changes and children feel safe when they know what to expect on a daily/regular basis. It is important to maintain boundaries and rules that will help children to feel secure.
- **Control.** Age appropriate sense of control. Grief can feel very out of control and unpredictable. Children feel empowered when they are able to make age appropriate decisions and have age appropriate control over their lives.
- **Safety and security.** Kids who are grieving need to feel safe and secure. When a child experiences a significant loss they often wonder what will happen to them. Remind children they are safe and the adults around them will continue to care for them, protect them, and meet their needs. Reassure children they will be taken care of.
- **Permission.** Children need permission to express or not express their feelings or thoughts. Healing happens when you create a safe place for children to talk about their feelings and thoughts or to take a break from talking about them. It is normal and healthy for children to experience a wide range of feelings and then also have times of acting normal and as if nothing happened.
- **Avenues for expression.** Encourage rituals and other expressions of grief beyond the funeral or memorial service. Give the child constructive outlets to act out about his grief such as art, play or sports. These constructive activities allow for expressing feelings such as anger, fear, guilt or anxiety.
- **Memorialization and connection.** Help the child find ways to stay connected to the person who died. It could be as simple as visiting the grave or special place or celebrating the birthday of the deceased. Rituals can be very helpful in connecting to the person who died.
- **Inclusion.** Include the child in discussions regarding the funeral or memorial service when age appropriate. This lets the child know that their opinions are valued.
- **Patience.** Grieving often takes longer than we might want. So, be patient as your child experiences grief. Be patient with your child with repetition. A child often has to come back to the same details and questions.



## Tips for Helping a Grieving Child

- *Take care of basic needs.* Adequate sleep, nutrition, hydration, exercise, time outdoors
- *Listen deeply.* Be curious and receptive. Attune and create safe space.
- *Give developmentally appropriate answers.* “I don’t know,” is a terrific answer and oftentimes the best answer.
- *Explain death if needed.* You should also explain that being dead means that the body has stopped working and that it cannot be fixed. It no longer feels cold or gets hungry, and it does not feel any more hurt or pain.
- *Don’t use euphemisms.* Avoid phrases like “passed away,” “gone,” “we lost him.” Kids tend to be very literal, and these phrases can cause confusion and anxiety.
- *Avoid replacing lost pets right away.* The bond between a child and pet is a very strong one.
- *“Sad Time.”* Allow children space to grieve. And remember children cannot typically tolerate long periods of sadness and need to move to other feelings and activities.
- *Keep talking about the person who died.* Share stories and memories often.
- *Say the things the child may have heard regularly from their loved one.*
- *Save special things from the loved one.* Blanket, quilts, bears, and asking the child if there is a special thing they would like to have that belonged to the person they are missing.
- *It is normal for grieving children to think they “see or hear” the deceased person.*
- *Invite children to participate in grief rituals/traditions.* For example, invite children to attend the funeral. Never force them but invite them and if they choose to go, prepare them for what they will see and experience (i.e. grown-ups having big feelings). Get creative in ways to involve the child in services or for the child to contribute (a poem, etc.).
- *Talk about the afterlife.* Even if you don’t have the answers. Let the child imagine about the afterlife.
- *Who else needs to be informed to help support the child/family?*
- *Children will grieve at other times and at milestones.*
- *Grief groups and grief camps* are available for additional social support, which can be helpful in supporting their healing process.
- *Foster connection and support* as much as possible/appropriate to decrease feelings of loneliness/isolation that can often be experienced in grief.
- *Model healthy expressions of grief emotions* and reassure kids (experientially) that it’s not their job to take care of your feelings; grown-ups can have grief feelings *and* create safety for the child’s emotional experience, too.



### **Remember grief is a part of life, it is unavoidable.**

Grief also brings about growth and opportunity as well as difficulty. Some “gifts” or blessings we can find in grief might include:

- Increasing empathy
- Encouragement to explore the life task of spirituality (which is a life task each individual needs to master).
- Increasing connection with others. Connection is a crucial C that needs to be developed.
- Increasing resilience and helping them cope with future grief.
- Working through grief can increase the Crucial C’s of courage and capable.

## When is it time to seek professional support?

Grieving is a natural process and takes time. If symptoms *persist beyond six months or are very impairing* to the child, it may be in the best interest of the child to seek out professional help. Doing so can help children and families work with their emotions, process and move through their grief symptoms and major impairments, and develop skills to cope with the grief process. Seeking out support from a grief professional does not mean anything negative! In fact, seeking out more support is one of the most healthy steps we can take!

Here are some signs that indicate a child may need more support. These problems can show up any time after loss (months or years):

- The child cannot be comforted
- Inability to sleep, prolonged fear of being alone
- Poor concentration
- Ongoing behavior problems
- Persistent regression to earlier behavior in young children, such as clinging, bedwetting, or thumb-sucking
- Excessively imitating the dead person
- Sharp drop in school performance or refusal to attend school
- Extended periods of depression –while sadness is normal, a prolonged loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities could be a sign that a child is struggling.
- Grief symptoms grow worse over time: grief signs should gradually diminish over time. If the symptoms are getting worse, a professional may be able to help the child cope with their feelings.
- Repeatedly expressing a desire/need to join the deceased person: if the child says they want to be dead or wish to be dead, it is important to get professional help.

(Information borrowed from and inspired by HighPeaks Hospice)



### Some expectable responses to grief and loss (in our minds, bodies, and relationships):

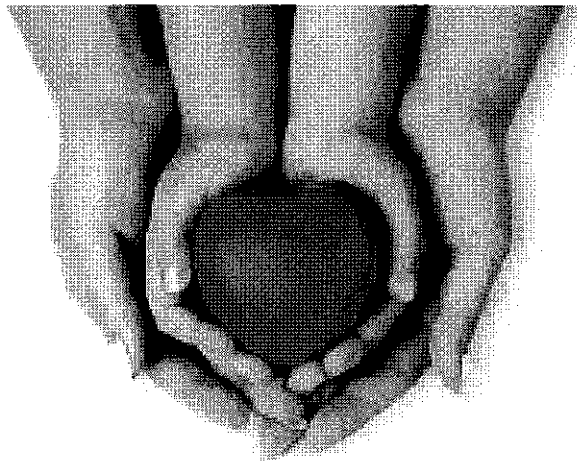
Confusion	Loss of appetite
Forgetfulness	Poor concentration/focus
Apathy	Aches/pains
Poor hygiene	Crying spells
Restlessness	Trouble sleeping/falling asleep
Chills/sweats	Stomach aches
Irritability	Trouble breathing
Headaches	Nightmares
Fatigue	Chest feels heavy

## Tips when helping families/parents

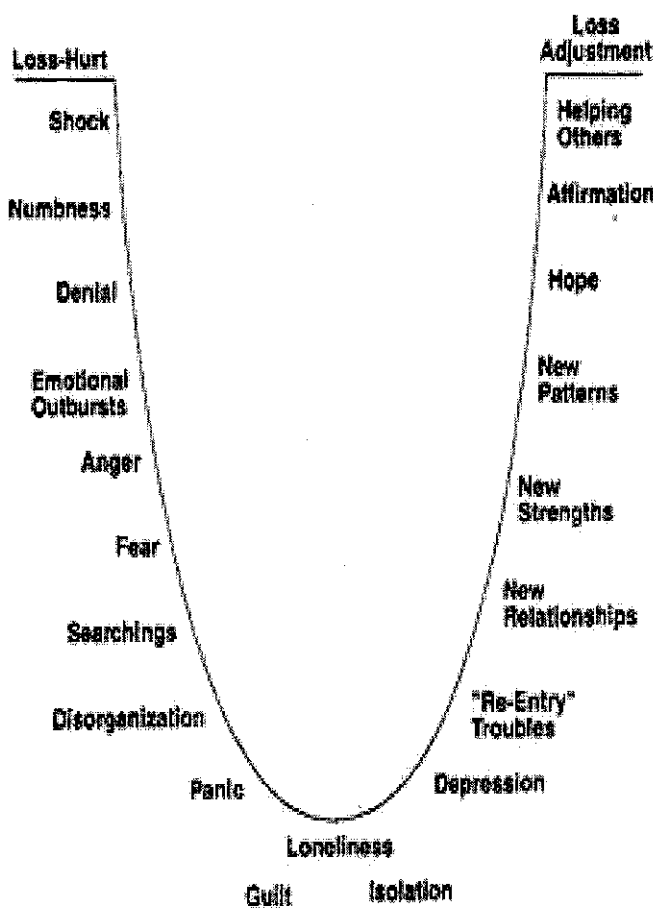
Parents who are grieving with their child/family are in a difficult situation. We need to remember to equip parents with the skills, tools, and support needed to help their child/family navigate this difficult time.

### Some things to remember:

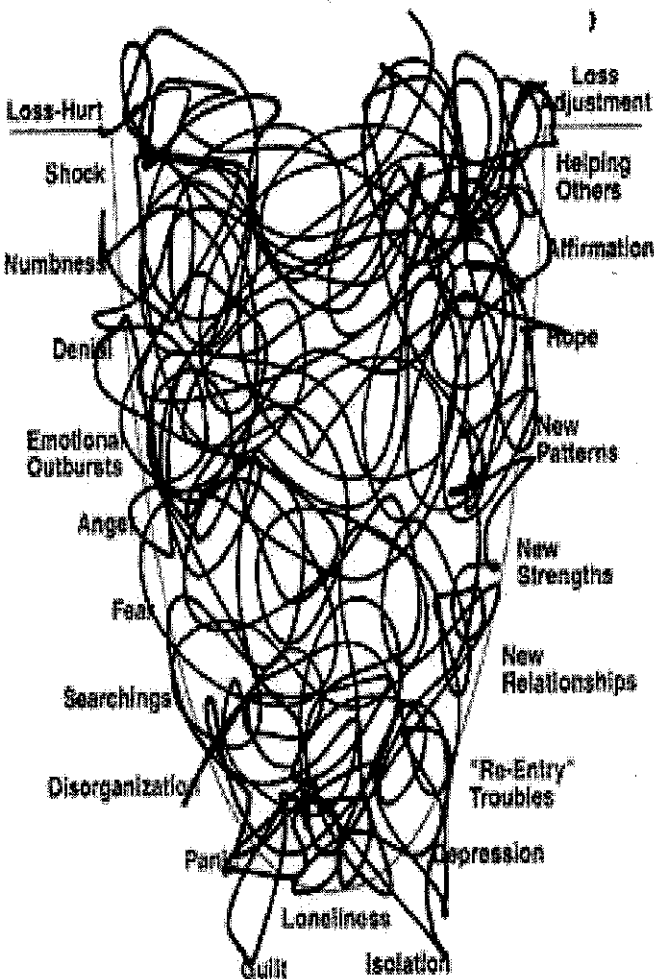
- ★ We are asking parents to stretch in ways that are very difficult and challenging as we are expecting them to continue to meet the physical and emotional needs of their children and family while grieving themselves. In many ways what is expected of them is incredibly hard, nearly impossible. We also need to help them figure out how to balance lowering the “bar” and expectations where it is appropriate.
- ★ Remind parents that oftentimes children and adults “over grieve” for a time and then grief may go under the radar for a time. This is normal.
- ★ Remind parents that all family members need to grieve in a way that is meaningful and unique to them. Not everyone grieves that same way and that is not only OK, it’s also healthy.
- ★ Adjusting to a new normal after a loss takes time. Children will learn to adjust and need consistency as well as things to look forward to. Be sure to establish new routines, rituals, and traditions as your family moves through grief.
- ★ There can be times of day that are challenging with children who are grieving. Be sure to ask parents what situations or times they are struggling with the most and think outside of the box to come up with creative ways of problem solving.



# STAGES OF GRIEF



# My experience



Borrowed from: <https://www.bethelfunerals.com.au/5-stages-of-grief-self-care/>

# 16 Tips for Continuing Bonds with People We've Lost

LITSA WILLIAMS, [www.whatsyourgrief.com](http://www.whatsyourgrief.com)

- 1. Talk to them.** Really! It's okay – it doesn't mean you're crazy! The fact that we don't have a post about this is mind-boggling to me because talking to a loved one who died is something we certainly do, it is something many (dare I say most?) grievers do, and it can bring a lot of comfort during the moments you miss them most. So talk away – be it out loud or in your head, this is a common way we continue a relationship with your loved one.
- 2. Write letters to the person you lost.** This is something you can do in a journal, on the computer, or in actual letters. There is an online resource to make writing even easier for you called AfterTalk where you can write privately to loved ones using their interactive writing tools. You can do it weekly, monthly, annually... whatever works for you. You can keep the letters or you can get rid of them. If you choose the latter and you have physical letters, you can do it in creative ways – you can tear them up and collage with them, paint over them in an art journal, or whatever else works for you. No matter where you write them or what you do with them, these letters keep you connected with your loved one in the present. If you are looking for inspiration, check out this post on thought catalog: "An Open Letter to My Dead Best Friend".
- 3. Keep photos of the person around.** This may seem absurdly obvious, but there will be people who make you feel uncomfortable about keeping photos. For example, a woman who wrote in to Ask Amy expressing concern that her widowed boyfriend still had pictures of his wife around. She didn't ask our opinion, but luckily we decided to share what we thought anyway. Keeping photos around keeps us connected with our loved one and often helps us remember the ways that person continues to influence our lives.
- 4. Incorporate your loved one into events and special days.** Check out our suggestions for how you can remember your loved one on your wedding day. Consider leaving an empty chair at holiday meals to honor your loved one, or using one of our 18 other suggestions. Discuss as a family other ways that you may want to involve your loved one's memory at special events. You will certainly be thinking of them on these big days, so there is no reason to keep that inside if you want to find a more open way to involve your loved one in the event.
- 5. Imagine what advice they would give you when making tough decisions.** Big decisions are often overwhelming and when you have lost the person who you would have talked it over with it can be especially hard. Imagining a conversation with them, what they would have said, and the advice they might have given can help us feel connected and also help make big life choices a little easier.
- 6. Talk about them with new people, who never got to know your loved one.** There will often be new and important people in your life who did not know your loved one. It may be new friends, a significant other, or children, who never had the opportunity to meet your loved one when they were alive. Find ways to tell new people about your loved one, sharing stories or photos. This is a way that your loved one's legacy continues and you continue to keep them in your life as you move forward. In case you thought it was easy, you can read about my experience with new friends after the death of my dad here.
- 7. Live your life in a way you know they would be proud of.** Be it a spouse, a parent, grandparent, child, or friend, we often struggle knowing our loved one won't be there for accomplishments and milestones. Taking time to recognize that your loved one would be proud of you for a specific accomplishment can be comforting and remind us how we continue to be connected to our loved one.
- 8. Finish a project they were working on.** Be it a project around the house, a piece of artwork, a team they coached, or a volunteer project they were involved in, consider picking up where they left off. This can help you learn new things about your loved one, continue your connection with them in the present, and continue their legacy.
- 9. Take a trip they always wanted to take.** Though this one may sound depressing, I have known many grievers who have found comfort in this. Death can make us realize that life is short. We may ourselves be feeling inspired to travel and this can help us travel in a way that is meaningful in our grief. On trips like this, we may feel close to our loved one, imagining how they would have felt about the trip. It can be tough, certainly bittersweet, but for some people comforting. A great example of this is the movie "The Way".

**10. Keep up their facebook page.** This is more and more common and Facebook has even got the process in place to support it. You can request a memorialization page through Facebook here. Keeping up a Facebook page allows the person's friends to keep interacting on their wall, keeping an ongoing relationship with the person.

**11. Adopt a hobby that they enjoyed.** This one may push you out of your comfort zone, but if they loved to knit, learn to knit. If they loved to garden, learn to garden. It may not end up being the right fit for you, but either way, people often feel a closeness with their loved one in the process.

**12. Create a Dear Photograph.** Eleanor wrote a great post about Dear Photograph, a way to take a photo from the past and capture it in the present. She created her own, which you should absolutely check out! It can be a powerful symbolic reminder of the ways our loved ones still impact us in the present.

**13. Plan for the anniversary.** Though it may feel like everyone else has moved on, you should not feel embarrassed or self-conscious about planning something in memory of your loved one each year on the anniversary of their death, or another special day. Be it a small, personal ritual or a large event, find something that works for you. Check out our 30 suggestions for the anniversary of your loved one's death here.

**14. Keep something that belonged to your loved one.** You can't keep everything (even though sometimes it is very hard to part with items!) but keep a few meaningful items can be extremely powerful. This could be an item they owned or an item they gave you. Either way, there can be comfort found in these items, as they make us feel close to our loved one. Of note, there is a study floating around out there that says keeping belongings can cause increased sadness. This has not been my personal experience, nor is it the experience of many grievors I have worked with, which is why I have included it. It may not be ideal for everyone.

**15. Enjoy comfort foods.** In this case, comfort foods are foods that remind you of your loved one. Making a recipe your loved one always made, or eating one of your loved one's favorite foods can bring back great memories and continue to connect us to our loved ones in everyday activities, like cooking and eating. I tried to make grandmother's holiday cookies (and epically failed), but I did succeed in making my dad's favorite cake.

**16. Experience your loved one's presence.** It is common to feel the presence of your loved one – it may just be a feeling, it may be a specific type of wind or bird or countless other things that seem to be a sign of our loved one's presence. Unlike the studies about keeping something that belonged to your loved one, feeling your loved one's presence has been shown in studies to ease the sadness that accompanies grief. So when you feel your loved one's presence, feel it without apology or any worry that you are crazy! This is a normal and helpful way we continue bonds with our loved ones.

