GriefShare®

What's Normal in Grief

25 Common Responses Through the Grief Process

What to expect on your grief journey

Grief turns your world upside down, making it difficult to know which way is forward and where to turn for help. It's understandable that your thoughts are scattered, your days are disorienting, and everything around you feels off.

It can help to view grief as a journey. But since this is a journey you're never prepared for, you'll want to know what to expect along the way—and how to handle the emotional twists and turns and daily challenges.

This book is a guide that describes a range of reactions that could be part of your grief process. You'll hear from other people who have walked this path before you, and you'll learn what's normal in grief and what might occur along the way. The chapters introduce 25 common grief experiences, and each includes a personal story and tips on how to navigate those experiences in a healthy way.



About GriefShare

GriefShare has been coming alongside people on their grief journey for over 25 years, helping individuals find relief, comfort, and peace of mind. We do this through trusted grief support groups, online tools like this ebook, and print resources (like *Reflections*, our guided journal).

Over 1 million people have found help through GriefShare, and you can too. While this book will help you understand what's common in grief, a GriefShare group can offer dedicated, personal support and encouragement.

Learn more at **griefshare.org**

You're not alone on this grief journey. At GriefShare, we're here for you.

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Having an idea of what is normal in grief can be helpful. The topics below are from people who shared what *they* experienced during their grief journey. Look at this list and see which experiences you can relate to.

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Sadness

> *"Once I knew that he was going to pass, it was very devastating. I felt like in the core of my heart just a deep, deep sadness that wasn't lifting."*

> *"The first week was so difficult because my heart felt like it was in pieces."*

It seems so obvious to say when you're grieving you'll be sad. But the depth of sadness might surprise you. You might wonder, "I haven't felt *this* bad before. Is it normal? How long will it last?"

The sadness you feel after the death of a loved one can seem constant. Crushing. Inescapable. It can also come in waves that at times make it feel like you're going under. No matter how you're experiencing sadness, it's normal—and understandable. Your loved one had a crucial part in your life. You relied on him or her for advice, support, and companionship. Because you valued your relationship so much, losing your loved one—and all the different aspects of your relationship—hurts more than anything else.

However, there are two essential things to keep in mind:

- The sadness might initially feel constant and overwhelming, but it will soften over time—even though the loss is permanent.
- The sadness will reappear or feel more pronounced at times when you're reminded of the loss (like around holidays and birthdays).

It's important to recognize that sadness has a purpose. In sadness you slow down. You are prone to think about the implications of your loss on your life. You'll feel an emptiness when you do this. But it's also an opportunity to think about the positive impact of the relationship on your life. The relationship has ended, but its benefits in your life can be nurtured.



Emotional overload

“In the grieving process, my emotions were all over the map.”

“After Dad died, I thought, ‘I gotta be strong for everybody else.’ I didn’t tell the truth about what was going on inside of me: my doubt, my fear, my anger.”

“There are many things that I can’t remember. What I do remember is just this swirl of emotions. There was fear. There was anger. There was regret.”

Counselor H. Norman Wright describes this rapid and chaotic rush of emotions: “In grief you can vacillate between being emotionally fragile to being in an emotional coma. And it goes back and forth, and back and forth. It’s consuming.”

Because of this, “It’s normal to feel like you’re going crazy because your world is turned upside down,” according to Dr. Sabrina Black. “You’ve got to consider that there’s a ball of emotions that you’re cycling through. Everything’s happening all at once. And you may think, ‘I’m sad today. I just can’t stop crying. And then I’m laughing and thinking about memories of great things that we’ve done together.’ And so it’s normal to feel like all of a sudden you don’t know what’s going on, because your emotions are raging.”

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Grief ambushes

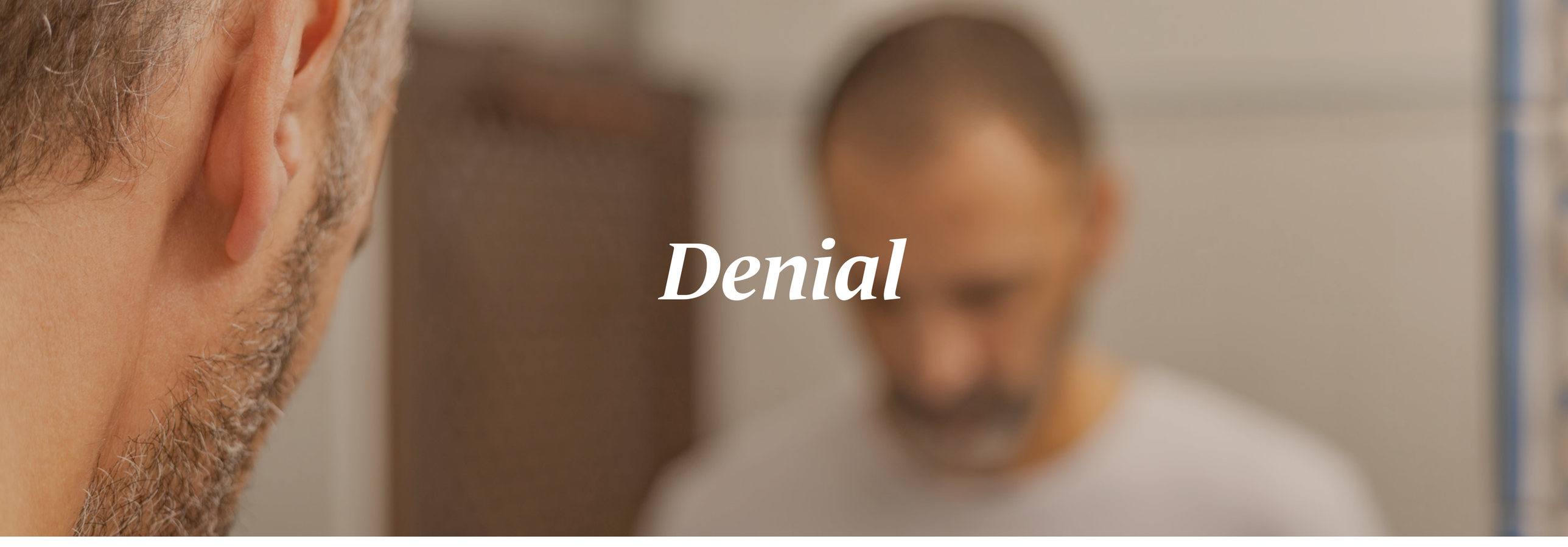
“I just stood there in the cookie aisle, crying!”

“Every time I hear about a new play coming to town, I think of her because she loved the theater.”

It’s not uncommon to experience unexpected waves of grief. Crying in the grocery store when you see a loved one’s favorite cookie. Sobbing when a song comes on the radio that the two of you enjoyed. Sometimes you might find yourself just being on the verge of tears and you’re not quite sure why. These types of responses are very common.

Being ambushed by grief is simply part of the experience most grievers face. It might be embarrassing at times, but remember that the tears represent how blessed you were with the relationship you’ve lost. It *must* hurt if you’ve been so blessed. If you can be alone for a little while to cry, do so. Eventually the tears will stop. And eventually, so will the ambushes.

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Denial

“I’m just trying to keep my life as normal as I can. What’s wrong with that?”

“I just don’t like to think about stuff like this!”

This grief response, denial, might sound odd to you. If the person is not here, how can that be denied? Sometimes denial comes in the form of a refusal to make *necessary* changes in your life, but not making these changes can make your life much more complicated. Sometimes it’s a refusal to enter the bedroom or office of the loved one, so that everything remains the same. Sometimes it’s anger toward anyone who wants to talk about your loved one. As initial reactions to a shocking event, these reactions aren’t unusual. But you should expect that over time, change will be needed. Life will resume, although it will have to be different.

Make changes slowly—and in stages. After a significant loss, rushing to make changes can cause negative consequences. Talk to a supportive person about what those changes might be and how you might go about making them.



Disorientation

“I’ve been playing cards with her for 15 years. What am I going to do with my Friday nights now?”

“I don’t know how he kept our financial records. Where do I start?”

When people have a crucial role in your life, you make room in your thinking, planning, and activities for their input or involvement. When they are no longer present, your life will naturally “limp along” for a while. You probably will catch yourself thinking, “I should ask her about this—but I can’t” or “I thought I’d have more time to learn this.” A life that has been ripped apart by death will be uncomfortable for a while. But it can also be redesigned a little at a time.

Disorganization and disorientation go together. Being disoriented means you’re unsure what next steps you should take. And if you’re disorganized, it’s hard to know whether you even have the resources you need for those next steps.

Here’s what can help:

- Begin by listing the responsibilities you have.
- Look at the first one and ask yourself: Do I have what I’ll need to do this activity? If not, your next step is to secure what you’ll need.
- Look at your calendar: When can I plan on doing this activity? (If you realize you need help with this responsibility, ask around for someone who has experience with this task.)
- Move on to the next item on your list and repeat this procedure.



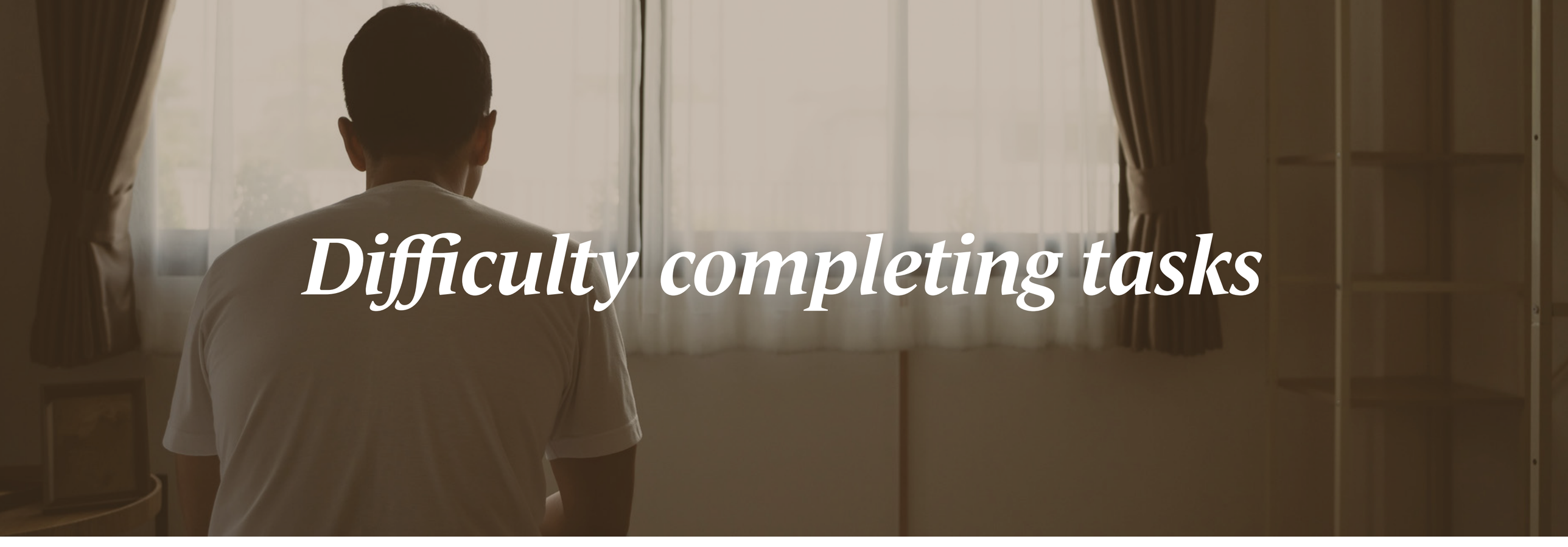
Discouragement

“I never even considered life without him.”

“Nothing seems important anymore.”

We naturally draw energy from relationships with people we’re close to. These relationships help make life enjoyable, exciting, and satisfying. And so, without that source of energy, it might be hard to get up in the morning. Initially, taking it easy is fine, because grief is stressful. But refusing to engage in your life won’t make the pain go away. So, planning “next steps,” even if they are small, will serve you better in the long run. This can be as simple as calling or texting someone to talk, meeting for coffee, taking a walk, or attending a church service together. Actually making the effort, even though you’d rather withdraw, will protect you from declining into depression.[1]

[1] If you have thoughts about ending your life, you need to talk to a physician, counselor, or pastor. If you can’t talk to someone face-to-face right away, call 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline.



Difficulty completing tasks

> *"I sometimes just sit in my chair—and before I know it—the morning is done."*

> *"All the responsibilities have now fallen on my shoulders. It can be very overwhelming."*

Sometimes you may find yourself staring into space, unaware that a chunk of time has passed. In other instances, you feel the days are dragging on endlessly, and everything is moving in slow motion. The clock and calendar may mean nothing to you anymore. This warped sense of time can make it hard to feel any urgency or desire to get things done.

On top of that, you've been forced to take on new responsibilities—some of which you might not know how to do—and everything seems all the more burdensome. But although learning new skills takes time and effort, once you've mastered them, they will make your life a little easier.

There are two crucial points to keep in mind:

- Doing *something* productive is usually better than doing nothing, as a general rule. (However, you should also allow yourself occasional breaks to relax.)
- Start slowly (or as slowly as you can) to learn new skills. Enlist help from other people in the early stages of learning new skills. That way, the needed task will get completed, plus you'll learn how to do it so you can possibly take care of it in the future.

Mental fog



“I looked down at my feet, and I was wearing two different shoes!”

“I forgot to pay my water, electric, gas, and phone bill in one month.”

Some people call it “brain fog.” It’s the challenge of trying to make a decision when you can’t weigh your options. Or, it’s forgetting why you entered the room you just walked into or where to turn when driving a familiar road. Grief is *very* distracting. So much has changed all at once, it’s hard to keep track of everything you need to do. And, on top of that, you’re probably going to be more tired than usual. But, little by little, as you settle into a routine, the fog will lift.

Recognize that brain fog is simply part of the process of coming to terms with a radical change in your life. It’s sort of like soreness after exercise; it’s part of the experience, but it is a *temporary* part of the experience. So, while you’re in the fog, write (or record) notes for yourself to help you keep track of what you’re doing. You might have a lot of sticky notes scattered around the rooms in your house for a while. That’s okay. The new decor has an important role to play for right now!



Feeling like your faith isn't working

"I always thought God and me were tight. Then this happened. I don't know what to think now."

"I prayed and prayed and prayed. But God ignored me!"

Grief has a way of shattering more than plans for the future. It can shatter what you thought you understood about the way life works. That can be disheartening or even infuriating. It's important, though, to remember that we are all limited in our understanding of "how life works." And even more important is remembering that God is understanding, compassionate, and patient. You can go to Him with your disappointment, confusion, and frustration.

Remember: Prayers to God do not have a specialized vocabulary. They don't have to be a certain length. One word, sometimes yelled in desperation, might be all the prayer you can muster. No problem; it's more important to humbly approach God than to shut Him out.



Hallucinations

“I walked into the bedroom—and there I saw my deceased wife standing beside our bed.”

“I swear I could smell his cologne while driving to work.”

Hallucinations are simply perceptions of someone or something that is not actually present. Hallucinations can occur in any of your senses: sight, smell, touch, taste, or hearing. They are more common than you might expect among those who’ve lost loved ones. They aren’t a sign of a serious problem and will usually stop after a while. However, if they are distressing, talk to a counselor or psychiatrist who has experience with helping grievers.

If you decide to talk to a professional, it will be helpful if you bring a log of your hallucinations with you. In your log, for each hallucination record:

- The day and time you experienced the hallucination
- What you were doing when you experienced the hallucination
- The sense(s) in which you experienced the hallucination
- The emotional impact of the hallucination

This information can help the professional come up with a possible treatment plan.

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Helping everyone but yourself

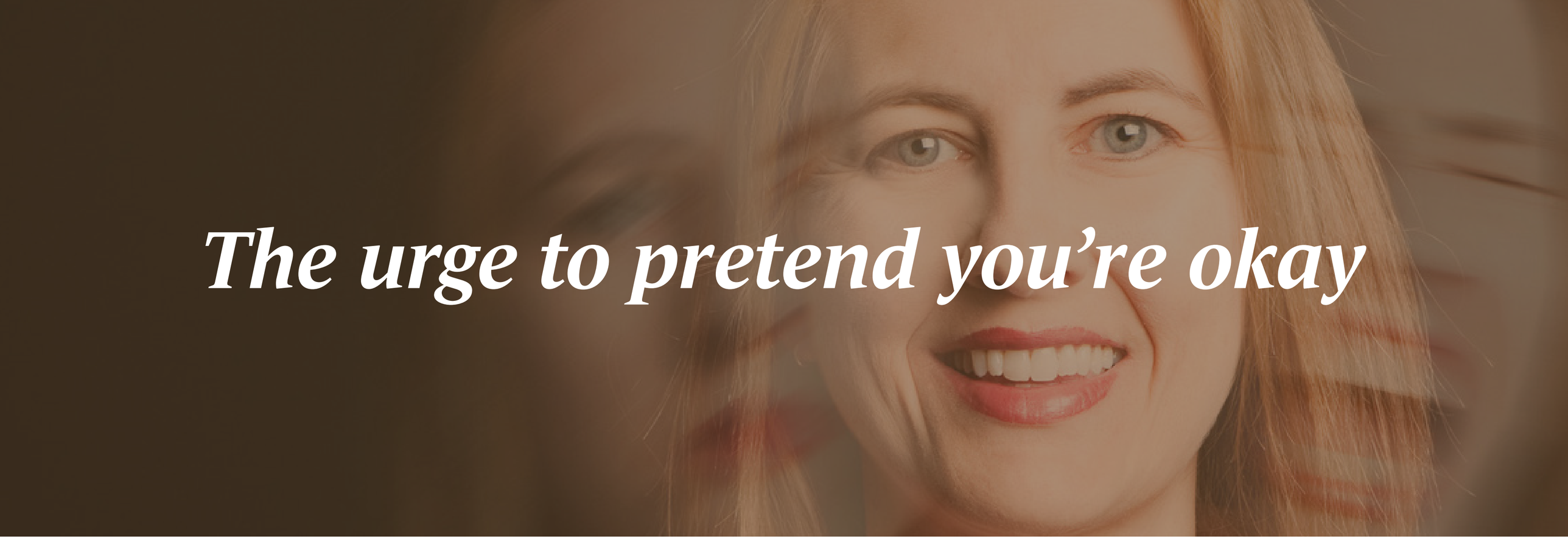
“Since my husband died, I’ve had to keep up the house, stay ahead of the kids’ schedules, and work more hours to make ends meet.”

“I have people counting on me. It’s hard to say no.”

Grief requires a lot of changes in your life, especially if your loved one helped you with regular responsibilities. This is part of the reason why grief is such a heavy burden. However, it’s also the reason why taking some breaks—to rest and reenergize—is valuable. We all have limits. The more we create boundaries to stay within those limits, the easier it will be to resume life.

In order to increase time for self-care, and still fulfill your necessary responsibilities, will require planning:

- For the necessary chores: How often do they need to be done? (Can they be done less frequently than they had been in the past?) Are you the *only* person who could do them? Is there anyone you can ask for help in getting these chores done?
- For physical self-care activities: Recognize that they are necessary: sleep, proper nutrition, brief physical activities not associated with chores, etc. No one has unlimited energy except for the Lord. You might pick one of these activities at a time to include in your schedule, but then over time add more of them. If you use this approach, start with sleep, then nutrition, and then physical activity. Be sure to think through the barriers that might prevent you from engaging in these activities and brainstorm with someone how you might overcome those barriers.
- For devotional activities (Bible reading, prayer, meditation on Scripture): These activities keep you connected to the Lord. Through them you can experience His presence and receive wisdom and strength to persevere.



The urge to pretend you're okay

> *"I avoid sticking around after church or eating in the lunchroom at work, because I don't want to be asked about my loss."*

> *"When people ask me, 'How are you doing?' I make it easy on everyone. I just say, 'Fine.'"*

It can be embarrassing to break into tears around other people. And you might just be so tired of crying that you avoid people whose questions might start the tears flowing again. Or perhaps you're convinced that other people will think you're "weak" or "overly emotional" because of your grief. The reality is that crying and other strong grief reactions reflect the significance of your loss.

Occasionally avoiding conversations about your grief is okay, but a pattern of avoiding people for too long is not helpful in the long run. It will be a barrier to resuming your life. Here are suggestions that might help:

- Before going to social functions, think about who is going to be there so you can be prepared.
- Ask the host in advance if there's a room or area you might retreat to if you feel like you need a break during the event.
- Send a note to family and friends before the event, letting them know how you are doing. That way they won't be as inclined to ask when you're with them in person.



Avoiding reminders of your loved one

“I don’t go into my son’s room. Seeing his stuff … it’s so gut-wrenching.”

“I’ve taken down all her pictures. I can’t handle the constant reminders.”

Facing the pain of your loss will be excruciating, especially the first few weeks. And so, not constantly exposing yourself to the memories of your loved one can provide a needed break from processing your grief. But, as you slowly reengage with life, making whatever changes that might need to be made, the reminders of your loved one will come to have a different effect on you. Appreciation is more likely to replace the shock and pain.



Difficulty keeping pace

“I don’t know what’s going on. It’s like I can’t put two thoughts together.”

“I get to the middle of the day, and I’m just dragging.”

Grief is a major life stressor. It drains your physical, mental, and emotional reserves. Therefore, you might find it difficult to keep pace with responsibilities early in your grief journey. If you’re fatigued because your sleeping and eating are messed up, you might predictably feel more:

- Distracted
- Forgetful
- Prone to errors in reasoning

In the short term, you might need to ask for help or say no to some activities that aren’t critical. Eventually, you will be able to reintroduce those activities into your routine.

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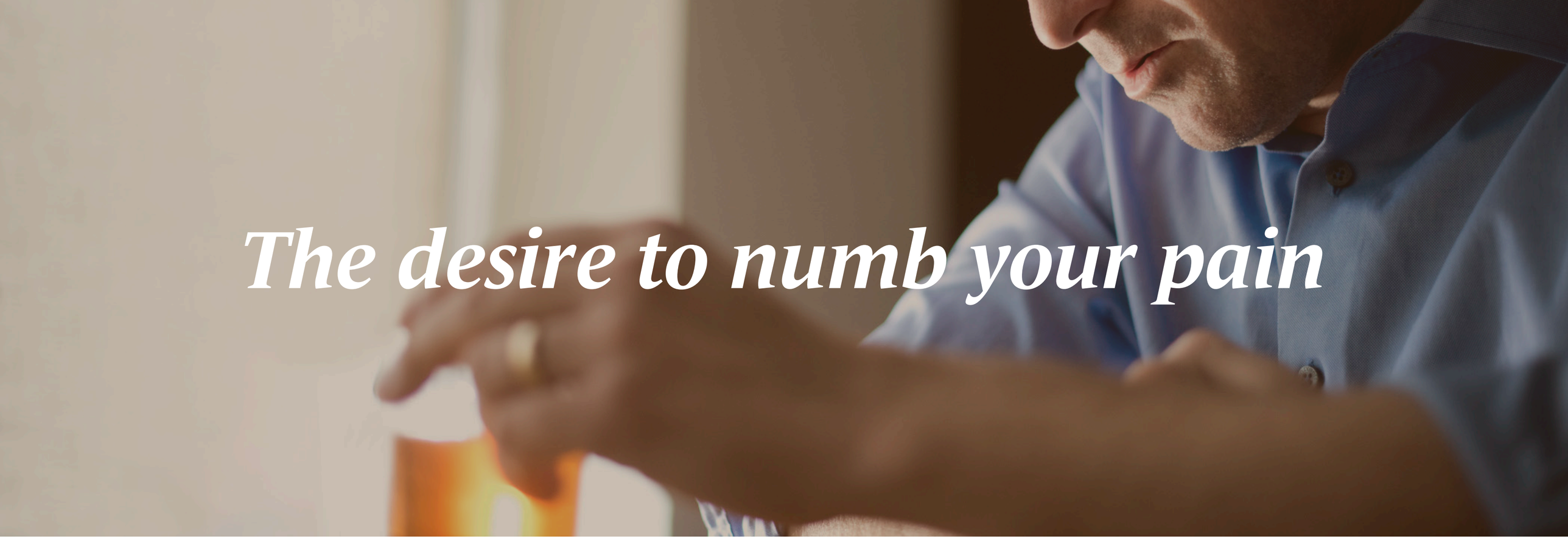


Relief

“It was so hard for her toward the end, with the pain she had. I felt genuine relief when she passed.”

“He got to the point where he needed help with **everything** *before he died. It got hard finding people who could be available to stay with him.”*

As chronic diseases progress, disability and often pain will increase. Everyone—the person with the disease as well as the caregivers—gets tired physically and emotionally. Feeling relief after a loved one’s death is normal. So don’t feel guilty. Your relief is not an indication that you’re callous or insensitive or that you didn’t love your deceased friend or family member. Your relief is a natural and typical response. You feel relief because the strain you lovingly endured (albeit at times with great difficulty) as a caregiver is now over. You can be relieved that your caregiving responsibilities have been lifted and that your loved one is no longer in pain—and still grieve your loved one’s death.



The desire to numb your pain

> *"I do drink more beer and wine after work."*

> *"TV, video games, bowling … I'll do whatever I can to not think about Dad's absence."*

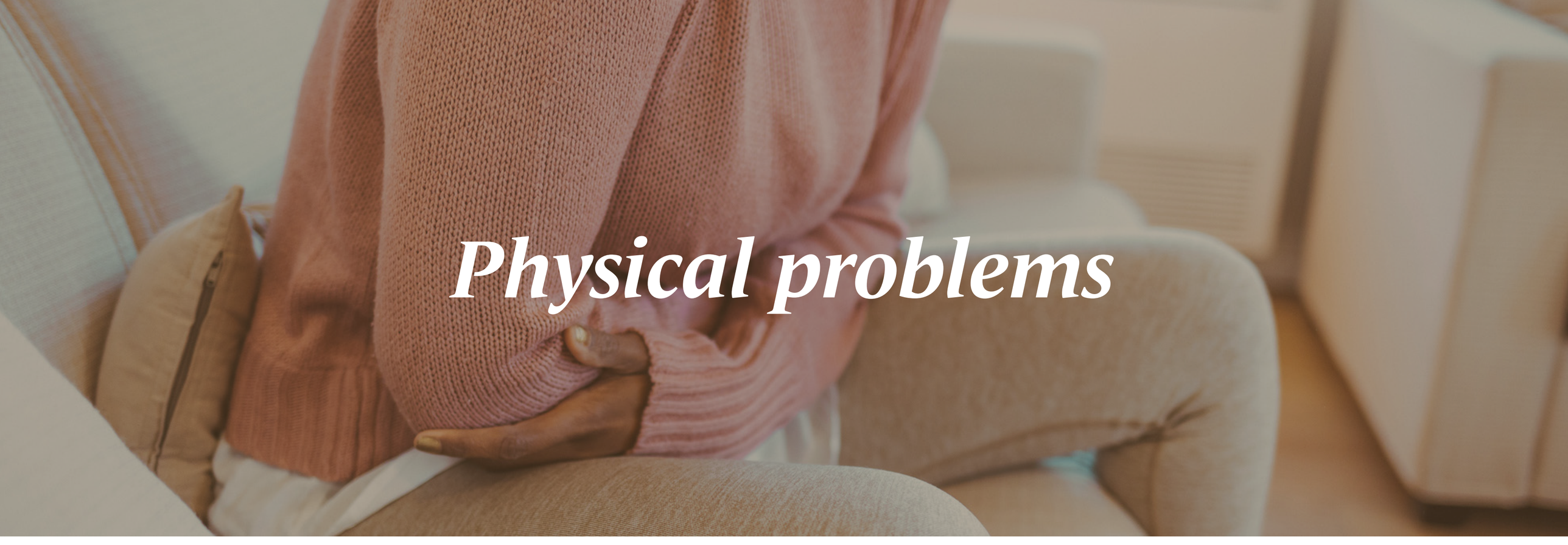
No one wants the kind of pain grief brings, and there are few experiences in life that compare to it. Grief is a drain on your body, mind, and soul. So occasional breaks are a good idea. But avoiding or numbing the pain only complicates being able to move forward.

Avoid engaging in these activities without considering the negative consequences:

- Drinking too much alcohol
- Breaking your budget by shopping too much
- Eating too much comfort food

You might benefit from talking to someone who knows you well about when these activities seem to be especially tempting—and what perceived benefit you get out of them. (Don't brush off these activities by saying, "There's no benefit from them." If that were true, they wouldn't be tempting!) But then talk about the negative consequences that also come with these activities. What *burden* might dealing with these negative consequences add to your life? (Think about past experiences with these negative consequences.)

The pain associated with grief will lessen over time as you adjust to life without your loved one. *However, avoiding adjustments in your life will only maintain a focus on the pain you are trying to avoid with the numbing activities*. You are better off experimenting with some changes to see which ones are most productive and sustainable for you. That will be a better option in the long run.



Physical problems

“My throat and my chest felt tight. I went to the doctor, but she told me my heart was fine; I was grieving.”

“Every time I thought about eating after Mom died, my gut felt like it was tied in knots.”

We usually think of grief in terms of an emotional reaction. However, when we *feel* emotions it’s because they occur in our *bodies*. So, when you dwell on very troubling thoughts, like the death of a loved one, what happens in your brain triggers a cascade of reactions involving other organs in your body. This can result in physical symptoms, such as a stomachache, headache, tightness in the chest, nausea, hurting all over, migraines, shortness of breath, etc.

As you gradually deal with the aftermath of your loved one’s death, with the support of others you will also begin to feel more “normal.”[2] If you have a preexisting medical condition, it would be wise to make an appointment with your physician just to make sure there haven’t been any changes.

[2] A GriefShare group is a safe, supportive place where people understand what you’re going through. Find a group near you or online at griefshare.org.



Feeling guilty when you have fun

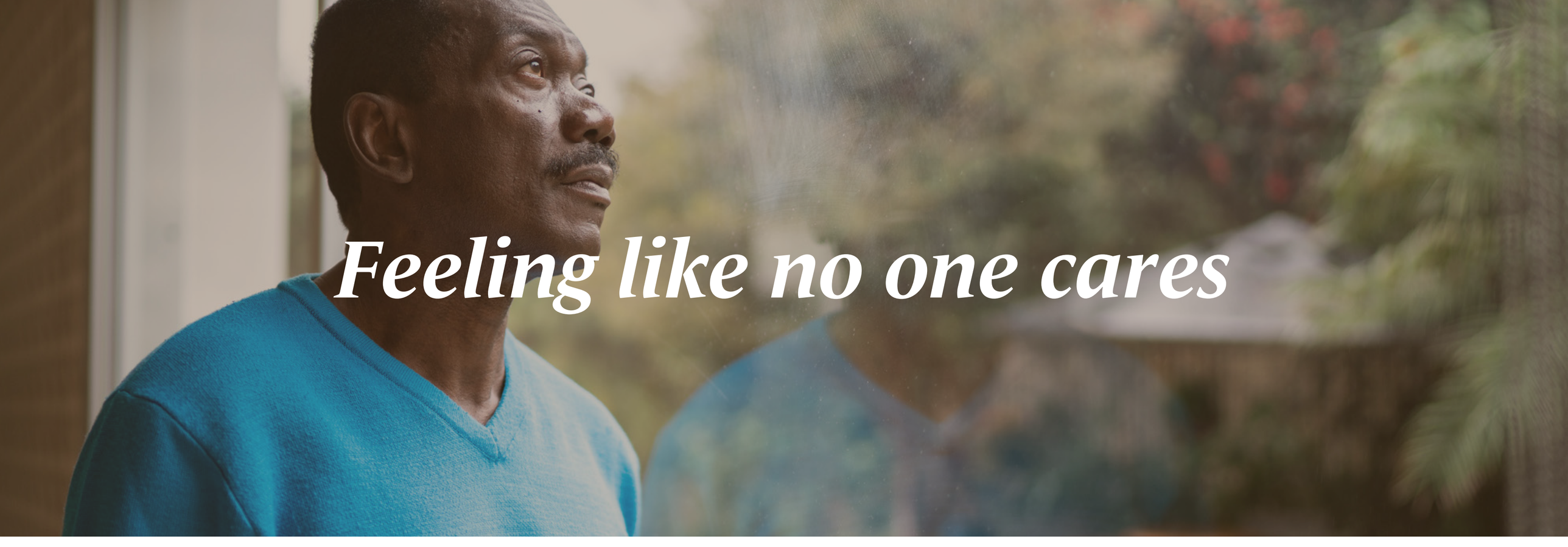
“Any time I found myself laughing after my wife’s death, I thought to myself, ‘What are you doing?’”

“Going to the movies, reading novels … all things I used to do, now seem so frivolous.”

As you process your loved one’s death, you will be reminded why that relationship meant so much to you. However, *where* you put your focus will cause different emotional effects. For instance, when you think about what you no longer have from the relationship, that will generate sadness. When you focus on the good times you shared, this can prompt gratitude and laughter.

This fluctuation between sadness and happiness is part of wrestling with loss. There is no other way to move forward in your life. If you create some ways of memorializing your loved one (candles during the holidays, planting a tree, starting a scholarship fund, donating a needed object at a school or library, etc.), those can be meaningful ways to remember him or her. This can also help you give yourself the freedom to return to favorite activities you’ve enjoyed in the past or try new ones.

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Feeling like no one cares

“After my miscarriage, my coworkers didn’t even acknowledge the loss. That really hurt.”

“I was shocked to hear about my ex-husband’s accident. But I was even more shocked when people did not seem to understand why I was grieving.”

There are some types of losses that don’t seem to “fit” into the loss categories that people have in their minds, like the death of a divorced spouse or a miscarriage. People might have a hard time relating to these experiences of grief because they don’t understand how much the relationship meant to you. Here are some suggestions for dealing with this type of grief:

- Take the time to explain the significance of the loss to people you are close to and who care about you.
- Find a way of memorializing the person (go to the person’s favorite restaurant on a significant day, visit his or her favorite hangout, create memorial art that includes the pregnancy start and end dates, etc.).



Trying to handle everything yourself

“Everyone has busy lives. I don’t want to add any more to their schedules.”

“I’m going to have to learn how to do things alone anyway. I might as well get started.”

There are some things only you can do, because only you have the needed information or the legal authority. That’s true. But for a while, because of the drain that grief puts on your mind, body, and soul, you should accept offers of help. It’s safe to assume that if people offered to help you, then they will be willing to follow through on the offer. So, think of the things others could do that are taxing for you right now. Approach the people who love you with specific requests for assistance. Then, over time, work with them in these activities, gradually taking over full responsibility for them.



Feeling betrayed

“He could be so reckless!”

“I don’t know how many times I warned her about that!”

Sometimes feeling abandoned through the death of a loved one carries with it a sense of betrayal. There’s the nagging sense that your loved one “should have known better” or “should have been more careful.” Thoughts like this might generate anger. And if there was some irresponsibility surrounding the death, that makes sense. You do, however, have to watch out for bitterness (resentment), because it will not help your recovery.

In light of the danger bitterness brings, you should monitor how you’re thinking about your loved one’s death. Thoughts that generate anger should not be allowed to linger. To counteract angry thoughts, it can help to:

- Remind yourself that *everyone* will make foolish decisions in life, which includes your loved one, other people around you, and you.
- Remind yourself of what you know to be true about how your loved one felt about you—remembering how your loved one felt about you deep down can be a comfort.

Both of these suggestions can help stem the flow of thoughts that lead to bitterness.



Feeling abandoned

“I can’t believe she is no longer around. What am I going to do?”

“How am I going to manage with the kids, work, life?”

The loss of a loved one might come with a sense of being “left behind,” like you’re left to shoulder responsibilities by yourself that you’re not sure you can. You might have lost your “go-to” person, the one you’d usually tell your good news to or ask for advice when you weren’t sure what to do.

The feeling of abandonment is usually tied to (1) being overwhelmed and/or (2) feeling anger over the circumstances leading to the loss. Here are some tips that can help:

- Find supportive people to talk to.[3]
- Ask for help from those who offer it (this is not a time to be bashful or proud).

[3] A GriefShare group is a safe, supportive place where people understand what you’re going through. Find a group near you or online at griefshare.org.



Intrusive thoughts

“When I’m in bed, I start thinking about what the accident site looked like, and then I can’t settle down enough to sleep.”

“I don’t want to be alone with my thoughts. I find ways to distract myself: TV, texting, social media.”

Following a sudden or violent loss, your thoughts may be troubling, intrusive, and disturbing. This happens because the tragedy has shocked you, and shocking images tend to persist longer in our minds. It’s one way that the brain is designed to keep you safe (so you can avoid a similar tragedy). So, having these types of thoughts is common.

Nevertheless, they can also be very disturbing. When they occur, here are some things to keep in mind:

- They are *automatic*, that is, you are not intentionally calling them up.
- You do not need to dwell on them. The more you do, the more frequent they will become. Therefore, try to engage in some other meaningful, thought-engaging activity rather than entertain them.

If intrusive thoughts continue to be disruptive in your life, talk to a counselor.



Wrestling with regrets

“What if I had insisted on him seeing the doctor sooner?”

“Why didn’t I swallow my pride and tell her I loved her?”

Because of its finality, death naturally leads to “what if” questions. It’s easy to speculate “What if I had done this?” or “What if I hadn’t hesitated to tell him my concerns?” Then it’s just as easy to envision the various *possibilities* that you think *might* have happened. Unfortunately, because you can’t reverse death, dwelling on the “what ifs” uses up energy with no possible return. It’s better to focus your mental energy on investing in the relationships in your life—not to replace the person you’ve lost, but to reorganize your life to make room for new possibilities.



Envy

“After Mom died, I avoided going to church on Mother’s Day. I couldn’t stomach everyone’s celebration of someone I no longer had in my life.”

“I’ve had four miscarriages. Going to stores or the park can get me in a grumpy mood if I see families with children in tow.”

When you’ve lost an important person, you might become intensely sensitive to others who still have that type of relationship in their lives. It stinks—and stings. Acknowledging that is important, because if you don’t recognize the envy, it will pin you down. Envy spawns bitterness, isolation, and lashing out at others. If envy grows, that means even more relationships will be in danger.

People who are envious and bitter are tempted to criticize rather than try to develop relationships. This leaves you with no change to help alleviate the envy. It will take time, but investing in other relationships will help you see how life can go on, even though you’ve had this loss.

Next steps

While this book has made you aware of common grief experiences, connecting with other people who understand what you're going through is an essential step toward finding comfort and support. This is where GriefShare comes in.

What to expect at a GriefShare group

GriefShare is a 13-week grief support group program. Groups are available in person or online.

Each session consists of:

A powerful video featuring helpful insights from counselors, pastors, and healthcare professionals—plus relatable stories from people who share their experiences and what helped them through grief.

Supportive discussion time with people who understand what you're going through. It's a safe place to share your concerns and be encouraged. There's no pressure to talk if you don't want to!

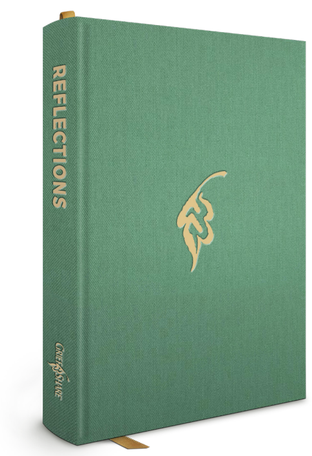
A helpful book to guide you in processing your emotions and experiences and coping with your loss. You'll apply what you heard during the group meeting time and gain tools to deal with complicated grief.

The grief journey can feel isolating, but you're not alone. GriefShare groups are here to provide encouragement, support, and guidance to help you grieve in a healthy way.



Healing resources

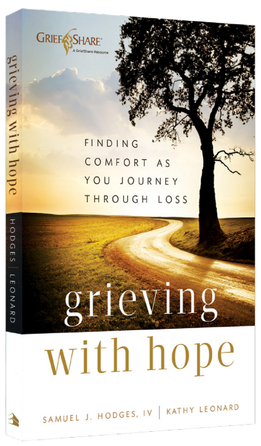
GriefShare is here to help with every step of your grief journey. In addition to our grief support groups, we offer:



Reflections: A Guided Journal by GriefShare

Journaling is an essential healing practice that can help you untangle your thoughts and feelings, but sitting down to a blank page can be intimidating. This is where *Reflections* comes in. This guided journal provides prompts that encourage you to go deeper into your experiences, helping you manage the difficult emotions you're facing.

Learn more at **griefshare.org/journal**



Grieving with Hope

By Samuel J. Hodges IV and Kathy Leonard

Grief doesn't occur in neatly defined stages. Instead, it's a journey, and it's possible to feel like you're taking steps forward on some days and going backward on others. No matter where you are on your grief journey, *Grieving with Hope* will help you understand the messages your emotions are trying to send and how to move in the direction of hope.

Learn more at **griefshare.org/hope**

GriefShare®

griefshare.org

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