

# How Do I Cope With Loss?

## The Purpose of This Booklet

The process of losing someone we love can be difficult to understand. Watching our loved one pass away is one of the hardest things we can experience in life. We may ask ourselves, “How can I cope with this?”, “how can I live when they are gone?”.

“How do I Cope with Loss?” is designed to help you answer these questions. The information and exercises provided will assist you in coming to terms with the death and dying of a loved one. The journaling exercises will also help you become aware of your own thoughts and emotions.

*“There are places in the heart that do not yet exist; suffering has to enter in for them to come to be.” – Léon Bloy*

## How You Might be Feeling

Everyone experiences grief and loss differently; you may or may not experience the feelings listed below. Remember, grief is unique to the individual; there is no one-way, or “right way” to grieve.

Common feelings you may be experiencing at the time of loss:

### Sorrow

“Why is this happening to my family?”

“I feel so sad, and I feel like I make my loved one feel worse because I’m upset.”

“It isn’t fair.”

### Hopelessness and despair

“I don’t know what to say to my loved one.”

“I don’t know how to make things better.”

“I don’t know how to go on without them.”

“I keep hoping for a miracle but nothing changes, why are my prayers going unanswered?”

### Guilt

“I should have done things differently when my loved one was healthy.”

“I should spend more time with them in the hospital.”

“I feel like I need a break from caring for my loved one, but how can I ask for that when they need me?”

“Sometimes I feel relieved that it’s all over, but then I feel bad because they’re gone.”

“My loved one and I were never that close. I want to support them, but how can I when I still carry resentment from past hurts?”

## **Anger**

“Why am I the one burdened with all of this?”

“My loved one doesn’t belong in palliative, we should be continuing treatment.”

“My family isn’t listening to what my loved one wants.”

## **Fear and anxiety**

“I don’t know what to expect when they pass away.”

“Will they be in pain when they die?”

“I’m afraid of being on my own.”

“I’m afraid of what this experience is doing to my family.”

“I’m worried about what will happen to my family after he/she passes away.”

## **Coping Strategies**

These coping strategies are designed to help you prepare for and cope when your loved one passes away.

### **Before a Loved One Passes Away:**

#### **Communication**

- Ask for help. You don’t have to go through this alone. If you are taking care of your loved one you can ask friends and family members to help take care of tasks at home. The nurses, doctors, social workers, volunteers, and other team members can help support you at the hospital.
- Talk to your loved one. Share with them how you are feeling, this may help to open communication.
- Don’t be afraid if you can’t think of anything to say to your loved one. Silence is a powerful thing, sometimes sitting together and sharing in a silence can be therapeutic.

#### **Your Body**

- Take time to take care of yourself. Your health and wellbeing is important, eating and sleeping when you are able to do so will help you cope.

## **After a Loved One Passes Away:**

### **Communication**

- Ask for help. Let people know what you need and how they can help you. If you feel like you cannot cope with talking to people ask someone close to you to tell friends and family members what your needs are.
- Spend time alone or with people who are comforting and welcoming.

### **Your Body**

- If you find that being in a certain room or place is too painful, try eating or sleeping in a different room for a while, or move the furniture around. If you have to go somewhere that is upsetting to you, ask someone you trust to go with you or to meet you there.
- Hot milk or herbal tea (chamomile) may help you fall asleep.
- Use a pillow or stuffed animal for comfort when falling asleep. You can hug it or place it behind your back.
- If you are unable to fall asleep after 30 minutes, get up and do something nice and relaxing for a short time.
- If eating alone is hard, change where you eat or where you sit at the table. Accept invitations to meals, and have people in for take-out meals.
- Try to eat regular healthy meals; avoid snacking on 'junk food'
- Preparing meals can be hard. Try using ready-made, nutritional meals from the freezer or deli section.
- Try having regular dinner/lunch dates with family or friends, i.e., every Monday.
- Recreational centers often have cooking classes, sharing kitchens, etc.
- Alcohol and drugs are not good coping strategies because they can mask the pain rather than help you deal with it.

### **Emotional Health**

- Allow yourself to feel your emotions – don't hide from them. Share your feelings with someone you trust.
- Don't try to live up to other people's ideas about how you "should" grieve. Your grief is unique to you; no one can tell you how to grieve.
- Support groups give you the choice of healing with other people who are in a similar situation.
- Find a creative or active outlet for your grief.
- Try writing, or painting, or exercising.

## Written Activities

These activities are designed to help you become aware of your thoughts and emotions. They will assist you in identifying your emotions, the cause of these feelings, and what you can do to help yourself cope.

### Journaling Exercise to Start Your Day

Today I am feeling:

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

I can tell I am feeling this way because:

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

I am worried that:

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

I am hopeful that:

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Hope and Fear Journaling Exercise

Answer the following questions 10 times as fast as possible. These questions will help you explore any feelings of hope and fear. Don't worry if you repeat yourself; a repeated answer means that it is important to you –Adapted from Lenoard Shaw, author of: “Love and Forgiveness”; VCH, “Guidebook to Help us During Difficult Times”; and June Swadron.

What am I afraid of right now?

---

---

---

---

What do I fear for myself?

---

---

---

---

What do I fear for my family?

---

---

---

---

What am I hopeful for right now?

---

---

---

---

What am I hopeful for (for myself)?

---

---

---

---

What am I hopeful for (for my family)?

---

---

---

---

## Journaling Exercise for Feeling Grateful

This exercise is designed to help you remember times of strength, and things which you can be grateful for. Read through these prompts and then write your story of giving thanks and feeling loved. Write as much or as little as you like; don't worry about filling up or writing more than what is provided at the bottom of the page – if you need more paper to write your thoughts and feelings that is okay. Adapted from June Swardon.

1. Think about your current home. Notice all the details big and small. Write about what you like or love about your home. Now, what you would want to change about it while still appreciating what is there now. Write about how your home makes you feel.
2. Think about the people in your life who support you. Think about the people who love you for being you – list them and what it is you think they like or love about you. Now list the people that you love and what it is you like or love about them. Think about the people who have encouraged you in life – these could be teachers, friends, coworkers, etc., and write about how they have supported you. Allow yourself to become aware of the people who are willing to help you, and recognize that you are not alone.
3. Think about work – this can be school work, career, volunteering, or being a stay at home parent. What skills and talents do you bring to your work? What do you learn from your work? If there are people at work who positively influence you, write about them and how they make you feel.
4. Think about your pet(s). How do your pets make your life better? Do they comfort you? Write what it is that you love about your pets.
5. Think about nature. Is there a place in the world where you feel completely at peace and connected with the world around you? This could be something you felt while hiking through the woods, or sitting in the park, or entering a library. Allow yourself time to sit back and think about this place, build it in your mind and recall that feeling of peace.
6. Think about yourself. What gifts and talents do you have to offer the world? What are your hobbies? What are your passions? What are your strengths? Maybe you are good at making people feel better about themselves, or maybe you are proud of how hard you work. Maybe you are a good mountain biker, or pianist. Allow yourself time to think about who you are and what you like and love about yourself. Write it down and allow yourself to appreciate who you are.
7. Think about a hardship from the past. Write about how you overcame this hardship, how it has influenced you to become the person you are now, and what you learnt from going through this difficult time. Appreciate the good and acknowledge the bad. Be aware of the qualities (i.e. strength, determination, compassion, etc.) it took to overcome this hardship, and allow yourself to love yourself.
8. Think about all the things in life that you are grateful for. You might be grateful for having a positive attitude, or for having certain people in your life. This gratitude can be for something big, or something small like:  
“When I was walking down the street, a stranger smiled and said, ‘good morning’. I appreciate how friendly people can be.”





## References

Vancouver Coastal Health. (November 2010). Guidebook to help us during difficult times.

Richmond Hospital: Supportive Palliative Care Unit  
Alex Duff, Moira Campbell, Rickie Avitan, Dr. Rev. Philip Tse

For more copies, go online at <http://vch.eduhealth.ca> or email [pchem@vch.ca](mailto:pchem@vch.ca) and quote Catalogue No. **GV.250.H69**  
© Vancouver Coastal Health, November 2016

The information in this document is intended solely for the person to whom it was given by the health care team.  
[www.vch.ca](http://www.vch.ca)