

# Grieving

A guide for your family and your friends

Centre universitaire  
de santé McGill



McGill University  
Health Centre

Office d'éducation des patients  
Patient Education Office

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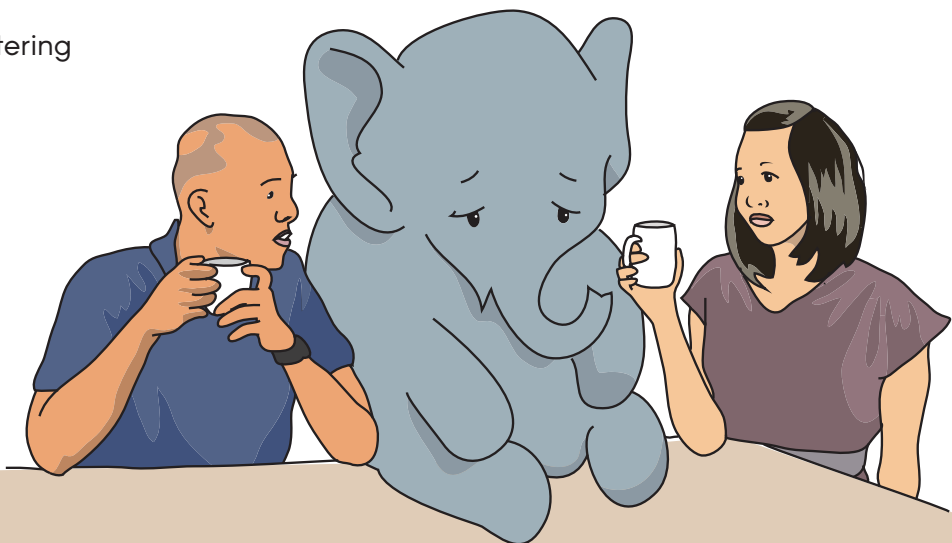
This material is also available through the  
MUHC Patient Education Office website  
[www.muhcpatienteducation.ca](http://www.muhcpatienteducation.ca)



# The Elephant in the Room

There's an elephant in the room,  
It is large and squatting, so it is hard to get around it.  
Yet we squeeze by with 'How are you?' and "I'm fine."  
And a thousand other forms of trivial chatter.  
We talk about the weather.  
We talk about work.  
We talk about everything else—except the elephant in the room.  
There's an elephant in the room.  
We all know it is there.  
We are thinking about the elephant as we talk together.  
It is constantly on our minds.  
For you see, it is a very big elephant.  
It has hurt us all.  
But we do not talk about the elephant in the room.  
Oh, please say her name.  
Oh, please let's talk about the elephant in the room.  
For if we can talk about her death, perhaps we can talk about her life.  
Can I say her name to you and not have you look away?  
For if I cannot, then you are leaving me  
Alone... in a room... with an elephant.

Terry Kettering



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# Your loved one has died

Your friends and family have finally left. The funeral or family time is over.

Now what will you do?

When someone you love dies, your life changes forever. It is difficult to know how to cope. Sometimes, the pain can be so intense that you may not know how to react.



“If someone loves a flower, of which just one single blossom grows in all the millions and millions of stars, it is enough to make him happy just to look at the stars.”

**Antoine de Saint-Exupéry**

Your family and friends may not always act as you would hope or expect.

They may be willing to support you and be sensitive to your loss. However, they may not truly understand the depth of what you are going through. You are the only person who can understand how you are feeling.

With this in mind, this booklet covers information about the grief process (e.g. common reactions, what to expect, where to find help, how to heal). It was written, using our experience working with families and understanding the special needs you might have when someone you love dies.

You may not be ready to read this whole booklet. You may prefer not to read it at all right away. You might only read it in part. Whatever you decide, we encourage you to read this booklet as you need it and at your own pace. We hope it will bring you comfort and hope. Our goal is to guide and to support you during this difficult time.

Please accept our sincere condolences.



### **Food for thought:**

"To live in hearts we leave,  
is not to die."

**Thomas Campbell**

# What is grief?

Grief is a natural and normal response to losing someone important in your life. There are many sides to grief. It can affect your emotions, your mental health or wellbeing, even your beliefs and values. It can also have an impact on your physical health.

As everyone is different, you will experience grief in your own unique way. Your grief experience is influenced by many things, such as:

**your age**

**your personality**

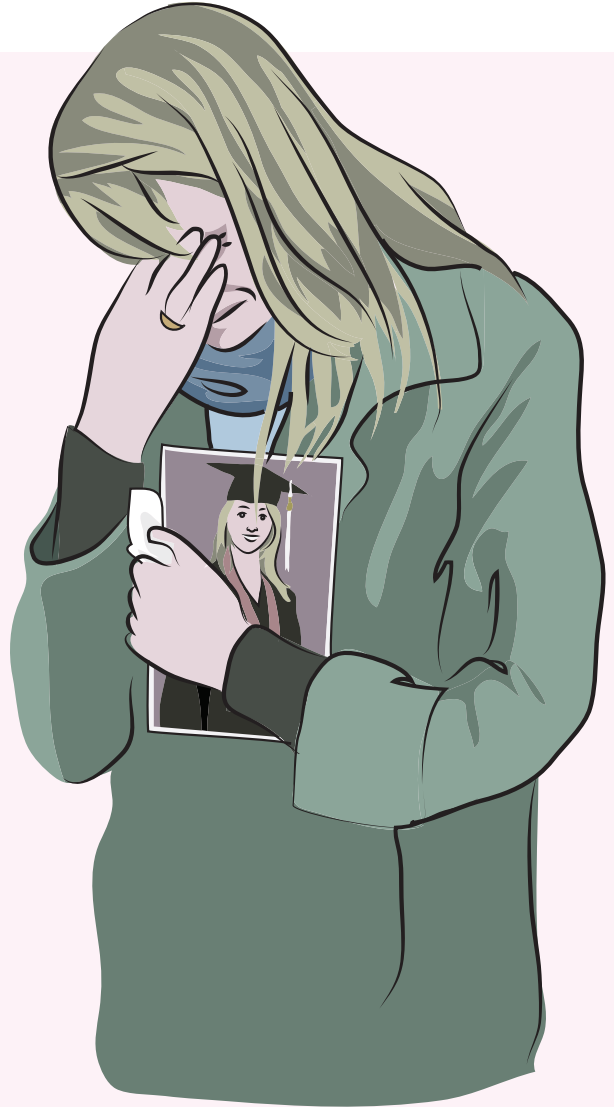
**your relationship with the person who died**

**the circumstances around your loved one's death**

**how others around you grieve**

**the support you may or may not have from others**

**previous losses you may have had, and different life experiences**





As everyone experiences grief differently, you and your loved ones may have different needs as you adjust to your loss.

Your grief also has no time limit. It can take weeks, months, or even years (much longer than what others might allow or see as acceptable).

You, your friends, and your family members may have different grief reactions. (see **page 20** to learn more).

You may not always be able to predict these reactions, or how they may appear or reappear.

Some people experience all the common reactions. Others experience just some of them. This may be difficult to handle, especially if it is a partner, a close family member or a friend.



**Everyone  
experiences  
grief differently**

However you experience grief, the ultimate goal is to cope the best way you can. While it may be hard to believe today, little by little, you will learn to live without that person in your life.

Rest assured that what you are experiencing is normal and part of the healing process.

Throughout it all, communication is key. Speak to someone you trust. Share your feelings with people who are important to you. Remember, you are not alone. There are people and resources that can help (see **page 40**).

## Communication is key



### Feeling overwhelmed by your grief?

We strongly suggest that you seek out professional help. Not sure where to turn?

See the “Looking for more information?” chapter on **page 56**. You can also speak to your doctor, nurse, or another health care professional. We are here to help!

# Types of Loss

How your loved one died can have a huge impact on how you grieve. There are many types of losses. This section will describe these common reactions and how you might cope.

For certain types of losses you may need extra help and support. For example: Sudden death, long-term illness, a child's death, homicide, suicide or more than one loss at the same time.

If this is the case for you, speak to your doctor, nurse or another health care professional.

You can also seek out help from groups who are specialised in offering grief support (see **page 56** to learn more).



# Sudden death

## TYPES OF LOSS

Death is a natural part of life. However, if tragedy strikes when you least expect it, it is especially hard. There is little or no time to prepare or to say good-bye.

Your reactions and feelings may be much more intense, making it especially difficult to cope.

Common reactions to the sudden death of a loved one are listed below. As everyone is different, some people may experience all these reactions. Others will not.



**Fear**

**Anxiety**

**Feeling disorganized**

**Shock**

**Numbness**

**Feeling helpless**

**Crying**

**Anger**

**Guilt**

Many families who have experienced a sudden traumatic death express that they need support from family, friends, and their community. Sharing your feelings with someone you trust, or having extra support through (individual or group) counseling can make all the difference. Whatever you decide is best for you, take the time to grieve and heal at your own pace. The better you understand your needs, the more realistic you will be about what to expect and how to cope.

# Long-term illness

## TYPES OF LOSS

If your loved one had a long-term illness, you will experience loss very differently. In fact, you may experience many losses and mourn these over a long period of time, as the illness takes its course.

A few examples of different losses that you might experience are listed below. These losses may be suffered by you, close family members, and friends. They may even be experienced by your loved one:

**Loss of perfect health**

**Changes in body image**

**Loss of freedom and independence**



There are many other losses that you might experience with long-term illness. While they are not described here, they may be just as important. Share your feelings with your loved ones. Speak to someone you trust. You can also speak to your doctor, nurse, spiritual care adviser or another health care professional. They are here to help!

As the disease takes its toll, you may begin to accept that death is inevitable. You and your family may feel closer at the end of your loved one's life and to each others pain and loss. Sometimes, this process can take many years. If this is the case for you, you may deny that the end will come. When it does, it may still be a shock.

At the same time, people are often surprised to feel relieved when their loved one dies. You may suddenly feel very lonely and at a loss, after so many years as a busy caregiver.

This is actually a very normal reaction for families who have experienced a long period of illness. You may have invested so much time and energy to provide care. You saw your loved one suffering. For these reasons, you may have lived for a long while with many intense emotions. When your loved one dies, you may feel devastated, yet free, at the same time.



### **Food for thought:**

"You don't heal from the loss of a loved one because time passes; you heal because of what you do with the time."

**Carol Crandall**

# Death of a child

## TYPES OF LOSS

The death of a child is one of the most difficult types of death. Your reactions and feelings will likely be very intense, making it very difficult to cope. The better you understand your needs, the more realistic you will be about what to expect and how to cope.

Many families who have experienced the death of their child express that they need support from family, friends, and their community. Sharing your feelings with someone you trust, or having extra support through (individual or group) counseling can make all the difference. Whatever you decide is best for you, take the time to grieve and heal at your own pace.



### Food for thought:

“Losing a child – there surely can be nothing more difficult for a parent. Regardless of the age of your child or the cause of death, there is a sense of injustice, a sense of the unreal. In the normal course of life, adults expect to face certain losses; grand-parents die first and eventually the parents. But the normal order of things has toppled... In our society, the loss of a child is understood as one of the most tragic events. Such a loss can affect all of your relationships: with a partner, other children, relatives, friends, and work colleagues. Understanding the grief process can be very helpful.”

**Michèle Viau-Chagnon (Translated by K. Bradley)**

# Homicide

## TYPES OF LOSS

It is devastating when the death of your loved one is a result of crime or violence. Under these circumstances, your grief may be affected by a number of things that feel well beyond your control (e.g. media coverage, how law enforcement officials respond, and how family and friends respond).

You may feel angry, frustrated, even a sense of injustice. With a homicide, you are not only coping with your grief, you are also coping with constant reminders about how the person died. A trial, jail sentencing, and maybe the eventual parole of the murderer can all delay your grieving the death of your loved one.



Sharing your feelings with someone you trust, or having extra support through (individual or group) counseling can make all the difference. Whatever you decide is best for you, take the time to grieve and heal at your own pace.



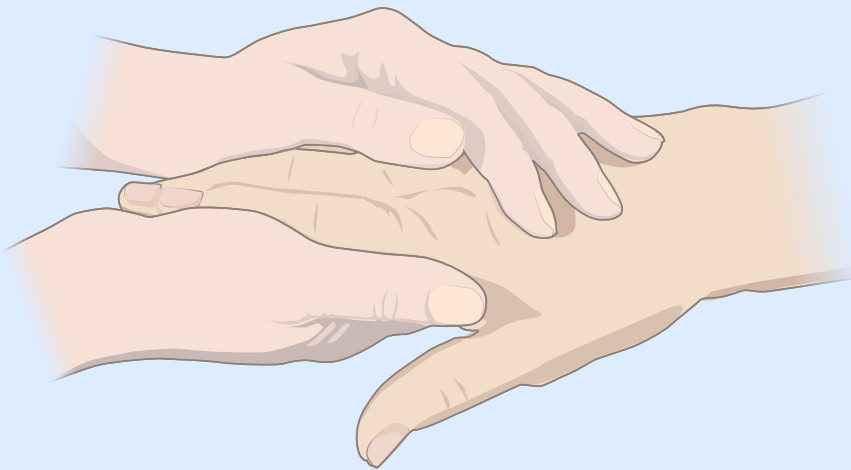
# Suicide

## TYPES OF LOSS

The suicide of a loved one can bring an extra burden for friends and family. You may feel guilt, shame, and anger, among a number of other intense emotions. You may feel very frustrated as you try to understand why your loved one took their life. This can make it harder to remember happy memories.

As many people believe suicide is dishonorable, you might be blamed, judged or even be avoided by your friends or family members. This may make you feel guilty for not being able to stop the person from taking their own life or for not seeing they needed help.

Sharing your feelings with someone you trust, or having extra support through (individual or group) counseling can make all the difference. This is very important as some grieving people have said they felt like committing suicide too.



### Food for thought:

"Is suicide a choice? Choice implies that a suicidal person can reasonably look at alternatives and select among them. If they could rationally choose, it would not be suicide. Suicide happens when ... no other choices are seen."

# Multiple losses

## TYPES OF LOSS

You may feel overcome with emotion if you have lost more than one loved one in a short period of time. You might even feel you have not grieved for a death that happened a year ago or even longer. Your feelings and reactions may blend together. You may feel drained and unable to focus on work. You may not be able to make sense of how you are feeling. If you are still working through the grief of a previous loss, this can keep you from making sense of and coping with a new loss.



Remember that how you feel about each person who died is different because your relationship with each one of them was different. You do not need to deal with all this grief all at once. Sharing your feelings with someone you trust, or having extra support through (individual or group) counseling can make all the difference.



# Common grief reactions



Experts who study grief or work with families experiencing loss will talk about common grief reactions.

These are normal emotional responses that you might have after someone you love has died.

Some may appear right way. Others may appear later.

You may not experience some of these reactions at all.

# Shock

## COMMON GRIEF REACTIONS



**... This can't be real ...**

**... I can't believe it ...**

At the time of a loved one's death, you may find yourself in a state of shock. You may feel numb. Your loss may feel surreal or impossible to believe. We have heard families say: "... I can't believe it ... This can't be real ... He can't be dead ... I'm supposed to die before him ..." Denial and anger are among the most common feelings that you might experience with shock. These feelings are normal.

The good news is that shock will not last. Shock can also help you gradually adjust to the reality of your loss.

# Anger

## COMMON GRIEF REACTIONS

Many people feel anger after the death of a loved one. Some people may feel angry at the person who died, especially if it was due to a suicide or a risky act. Others might feel angry at God, or at another higher power or spiritual being of their faith.

Some people may express their anger through words. Others may express it in the way they act. For example, they may act in anger towards friends, family, health care professionals, or others, such as survivors of an accident.



If you feel angry, try to find a safe way to express it.

You could:

**Go for a walk**

**Exercise**

**Cry**

**Punch a pillow**

Anger usually fades with time. If you are still feeling very angry months after the death, speak with a healthcare professional. He or she can help you to understand why you are angry and find ways to help you feel better.

# Guilt

## COMMON GRIEF REACTIONS

You may experience guilt after the death of a loved one. You may also feel the need to blame someone (e.g. a friend, family member, a health care professional) or something (e.g. health care system) for everything that has happened.

If your loved one's death was sudden or unexpected, these feelings may be especially strong. If this is the case for you, it is important to share this with friends or health care professionals. You may be reassured to know that you may feel differently after some time has passed. You may decide that no one is to blame and that your loved one's death simply could not be avoided.



### Did you know?

You can make an appointment with the doctor who cared for your loved one, if you still have unanswered questions around his or her death. This can sometimes make a huge difference as you work through your grief.

If you believe that there were errors in the care your loved one received, you can also write to the Complaints Commissioner of your health care centre.

# Depression

## COMMON GRIEF REACTIONS

It is normal to experience deep sadness after a loss. Along with this, you might have outbursts, or experience periods of crying and silence. These expressions of your sorrow are healthy and important. However, sometimes grief can be so intense that you feel you are no longer able to enjoy life.



Grief and depression share many of the same symptoms but they are not the same. Grief can be described as a roller coaster. Some days you feel great and you are able to do the activities you enjoy. On other days you feel very sad. This is normal. Depression is described as feeling sad and empty all the time. You do not have days when you feel happy.

### Did you know?

Antidepressant medication can help make you feel better if you are depressed but not if you are grieving.



You might be depressed if you also notice any of the changes below:

**Feeling hopeless**

**Little or no interest in day-to-day routines, activities, or work**

**Crying for no apparent reason**

**Problems sleeping or sleeping too much**

**Trouble concentrating**

**Trouble making decisions**

**Feeling tired all the time**

**Feeling worthless**

**Little or no interest in sex**

**Feeling like you want to die**

If you have been suffering some or all of these symptoms for more than a month, ask for help. Speak to a health care professional. You can also seek out help from groups who are specialised in grief support (see **page 56** to learn more). Remember: You are not alone.

**Feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope? Tried to hurt or kill yourself?**

Do not wait. Get help right away. Your health is important.

Not sure where to turn?

Speak to your family doctor, your local CLSC doctor, or any other health care professional you know and trust. They will be able to get you the help you need.

Reach out to a **suicide prevention center**. They offer support and information to families. You can call their main line directly (toll free):

**1-866-APPELLE (277-3553)**. You will be directed to the closest center in your area.

# Physical changes

Grief can sap your energy. It may affect how you sleep, causing sleeplessness (insomnia), weariness, exhaustion, even nightmares. You might lose or gain weight because of changes in your appetite. Some people may even have digestion problems (e.g. nausea, vomiting, diarrhea or constipation). Other people have also complained of headaches, chest pain, as well as having little or no energy.

**Grief can sap  
your energy**

While these problems will not last, it is very important to take care of your physical health. Have questions or concerns? Speak to your nurse or doctor, someone at your local CLSC, or another health care professional you trust. They will be able to get you the help you need.



# The funeral

Funerals have been around for thousands of years. They were created so people could express their grief and sorrow. They allow family and friends to gather and offer you support for the person who died. A funeral is a chance for you and your family to carry out any traditions that are part of your religion or culture. Funerals can help you and your family to celebrate the life of the person by sharing memories and mementoes. These can help you grieve so you can eventually get back to your regular activities.



## Food for thought:

“In sorrow, familiar faces are comforting, even if they are sad.”

**Josée Masson**



# Working through your grief: What can help?

You may at first feel as though nothing will ease your suffering.

However, there are a number of things that you can do that may help you cope.



## Take time to rest

- Try to take time off work.

Some people need more than just a few days off. If your work place has a bereavement leave but you feel it is not enough and you need to take a week or more, explore other options with your supervisor at work.

## Take care of yourself (even if this may take a lot of effort and energy)

- Take time to eat regular well-balanced meals, even if they are small.
- Maintain your physical health; get outside and go for walks.
- Avoid alcohol and drug abuse. Speak to someone you trust, if you need help with this.



### Share your thoughts and feelings

Confide in a close friend or family member.

Speak with a doctor or a grief counselor. You may need to see a few different professionals (e.g. counselors, doctors, clergy or other spiritual advisor) to get the help you need.

- Try writing down your thoughts and emotions on paper.
- Share your experience with others who are coping with a similar situation. Helping others can help you heal.

### Resolve any unfinished business with your loved one who has died

- Imagine a conversation with the person who died that settles unresolved issues. This could also be done with a friend or family member pretending to be the person who died.
- Complete an unfinished project such as a jigsaw puzzle, house renovations, or planting a garden.
- Plan the trip you were to go with your loved one and maybe take someone else along with you.



### Don't be alone with your grief

- Avoid being isolated. Surround yourself with family and friends.
- Join a support group. Connecting and sharing with others may help you feel less lonely.
- If you are religious, spend time at your place of worship.



### Have some fun

**(even if it feels as though you should not)**

- Wherever possible, allow yourself some time for fun and relaxation. Do not feel guilty about it.
- Plan to take part in social activities, however simple (e.g. share a cup of tea with a friend).
- Allow yourself the right to feel pleasure by making personal choices that feel good.

### Take on less

**(ask for help, if you need it)**

- Figure out where you need help (e.g. household chores, preparing meals, child care).
- Avoid extra stresses or major changes for the time being (e.g. new projects, moving, and change of job).

## Give yourself time to heal

- Take time to face the reality of your loss.
- Be patient with yourself. Give yourself the time you need to experience your emotions.
- Live in the present. Take one day at a time.

## Don't be hard on yourself

- Appreciate that everyone experiences grief in their own way. You are the only person who can understand how you are feeling. Other people may respond to your loved one's death very differently.
- Value and recognize your progress.
- Your loss may have changed you. Learn to love your new self.

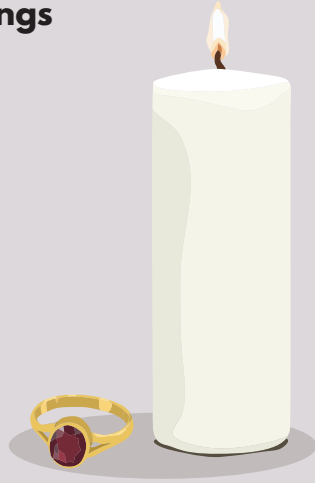
**Take one day  
at a time**





### Consider a symbolic act to express your feelings

- Light a memorial candle on holidays or special occasions.
- Write a message to your loved one. Insert it into a balloon and release it to the sky.
- Make a donation, in memory of your loved one, to his or her favorite charity.
- Plant a tree or a flower garden in their memory.
- Create a scrapbook with special photos and/or messages in your loved one's memory.
- During your next trip, make a special gesture in your loved one's memory (e.g. drop a rose in the ocean, light a special candle).
- On special occasions, such as a cultural /religious holiday or anniversary, buy a gift and donate it in their memory.
- Hang a Christmas stocking. Encourage family members to insert objects, drawings or letters to the person who has died.
- Buy a Christmas ornament each year as a special memory.



Everyone grieves differently. These symbolic acts may not be for you, feel free to create your own.

### Food for thought:

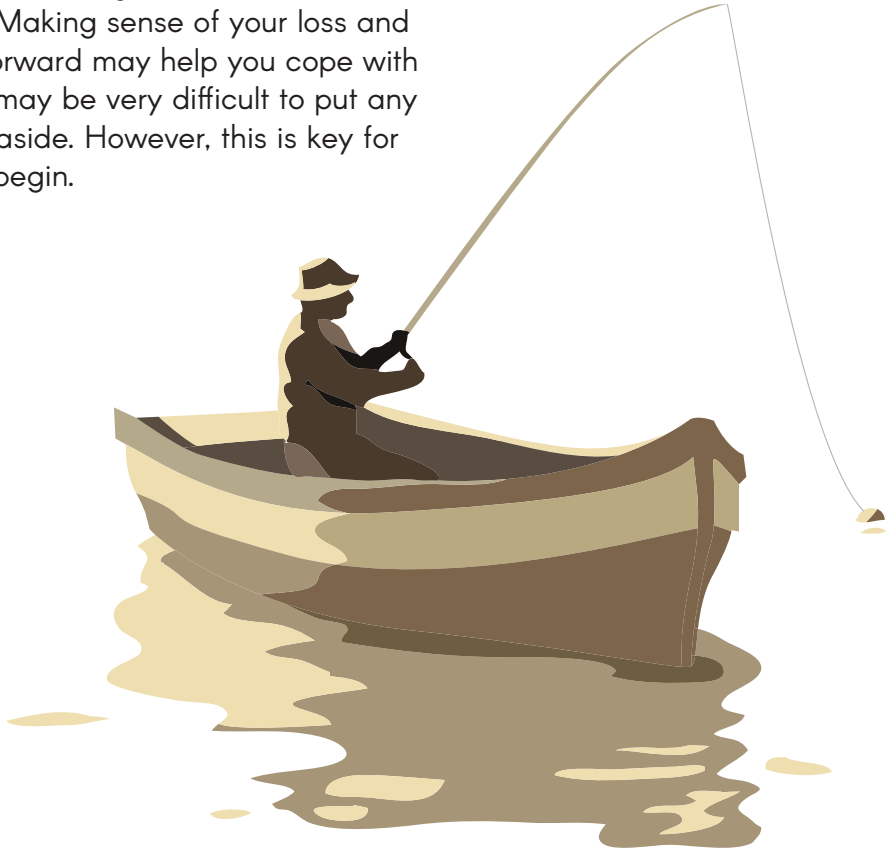
“It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye ...

It is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important. Men have forgotten this truth, said the fox. But you must not forget it.”

**Antoine de Saint-Exupéry**

# Healing

It can take time to move from loving someone who is present to learning to love them when they are gone. Making sense of your loss and slowly moving forward may help you cope with your feelings. It may be very difficult to put any feelings of guilt aside. However, this is key for your healing to begin.



## Food for thought:

"What we call the beginning is often the end. To make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from."

**T.S. Eliot**

# Hope

Nothing and no one can replace the person you lost. However, your memories will support you as you move forward with new and old projects. Your grief and other overwhelming feelings will fade over time. Your loved one's guiding spirit will encourage you to live, love, laugh, and enjoy life again.

It is important to have hope. Hope means you believe good things can still happen. This will allow you to live your life while honoring the memory of your loved one.



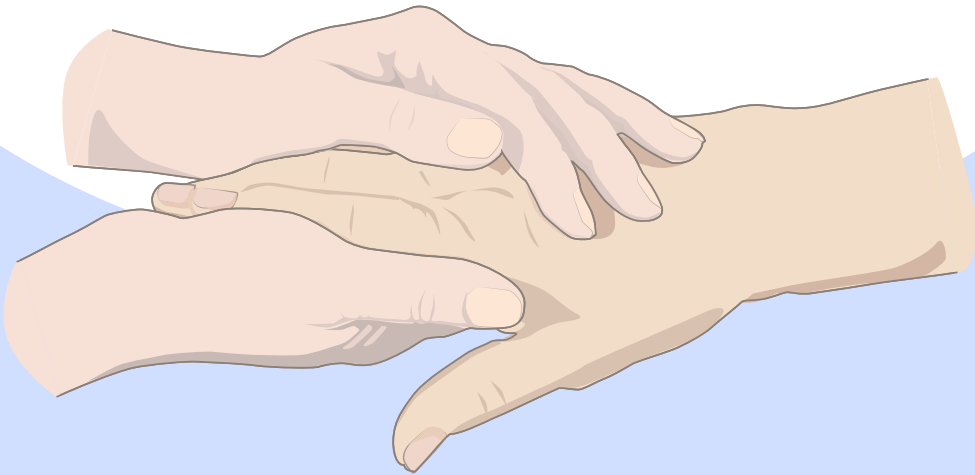
"Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation."

**Wernher Von Braun**

# Spirituality

While you are grieving, life may seem different and unreal. It may be hard to make sense of what you are feeling. Be reassured that this can be a normal part of grief. For some people, being part of a spiritual or religious group may be comforting and reassuring at this time. Faith and a sense there is something larger or beyond ourselves may be a great source of strength.

Still, others may find it difficult to take part in a community they enjoyed in the past. Their beliefs or sense of spirituality may change after a death.



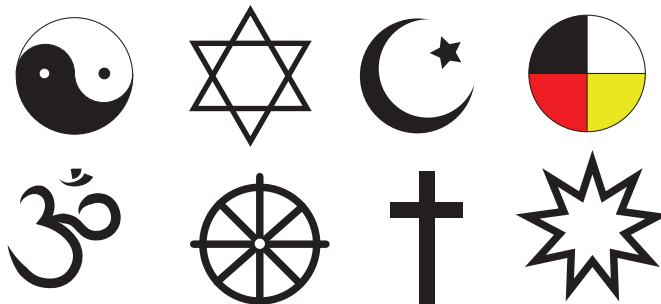
## Food for thought:

“... My soul waits for the Lord more than the watcher for the morning ...”

**Psalms 130**

**You may want to reflect on your own beliefs, values, and sense of spirituality. Ask yourself: Might any of these things help you heal?**

- Reach out to friends and/or a spiritual advisor who might be willing to be a listening ear.
- Try praying, if you have found this helpful in the past.
- If you belong to a spiritual or religious group, share your feelings at an event or service (e.g. a pilgrimage, retreat or worship service). Some temples, synagogues, and churches, as well as certain spiritual traditions, may offer special services for those who are grieving a death.
- Speak to a member of the health care team who cared for your loved one. Your hospital's palliative care unit and chapel may have special programs that can help.
- Seek out a place where you have found spiritual comfort in the past.



# Letting go

Letting go of your loved one will take time. As you do, you will slowly accept and adjust to a life without your loved one. This may mean that you need to go about your day-to-day life differently now. The relationships, roles, and responsibilities in your family may change.

Letting go does not mean that you are forgetting the person who died. It is normal to still have lingering feelings of regret, sadness and sorrow. You might even experience new losses as you become aware of how your loved one's death will impact on your dreams and future projects. For instance, we have heard people say: "I won't see my son graduate ..." or "My mother will never attend my wedding ..."

It is sad that your loved one will not be able to attend important events in the future. Still, there are ways to include them, even though they will not be physically there. For instance, you could bring a personal item or a token representing your loved one (e.g. wear a special piece of jewelry or clothing, bring along a picture, or set up an extra chair) to the event.



## Food for thought:

"Pulling away from the other, getting back into your "own skin", as you begin to remember, as you draw the breath of life for two. For the last breath of a loved one inspires us to redefine ourselves as individuals in the renewed effort to live."

**Johanne de Montigny**

# Adapting to your loss

Accepting that you will never be able to talk with or touch your loved one again can be very painful. Little by little, you will adapt to this new reality. Over time, you will find new energy and motivation to take part in life, new relationships, and projects. This is a positive sign of healing and moving forward.



Grief and sorrow can be expressed in many ways, as you gradually learn to live life without your loved one. Accepting the death of your loved one does not mean that you will no longer think of them or not miss them. Certain holidays, birthdays, special occasions, memories, or songs may cause moments of grief. These experiences are difficult, but normal. The one who has died is still present in your life through a legacy of memories.

Allow yourself the right to reinvest in life, at your own pace. With time and effort your life will become meaningful and fulfilling once again.

## Food for thought:

“Grief is not only separation and departure of those we love, but conscious and unconscious loss of our romantic dreams, our fond hopes, our illusions of freedom, power and security.”

**Judith Viorst**

# Children & Grief

Children, like adults, can be deeply affected when a close relative, parent, or loved one dies. It may be especially frightening and difficult for them if they do not understand what is happening, but can see others grieving or in distress.

This section will describe how your child may feel or react. It will cover tips and strategies on how to explain what has happened and how to prepare them for what is ahead. Ultimately, we hope that it will guide you as you support your child and help them grieve.





As a parent, you may have concerns and questions around how to support your child to help them cope with a loved one's death. You might ask:

- **How do I talk about death to my child?**
- **What might be a normal grief reaction for a child? What might they need?**
- **Should I bring my child to the hospital? Should he or she see the body?**
- **Should I bring my child to the funeral home and to the ceremony?**
- **Should I talk to their friends or teachers?**
- **When should my child return to school?**
- **How will I know if my child needs help?**



### **Food for thought:**

“Locked up grief won’t go away on its own; instead it grows, poisoning and feeding on the silence, without us even knowing it. Encourage children who are ignoring their suffering to cry, this is the most charitable service you can offer them.”

**Anny Dupery**

# How do I talk about death with my child?

While this might be the most difficult thing you have ever done, it is important to share the news of your loved one's death, as soon as possible. Children are more aware than we realize that something happened. Telling them sooner rather than later lets them know their feelings are important and that they are included. Ideally, this devastating news should come from a parent, close relative, or another person your child knows and trusts.

You may wonder how to approach the topic with your child.

Below are a few tips and strategies that we hope may help you support your child during this challenging time:

## **Speak to your child in a private place**

If you can, speak with them in a place that is familiar to help them feel secure (e.g. at home).



## **Use simple and direct language**

- Be honest.
- Speak to your child using words they can understand (e.g. “Your father was in a bad accident and he is dead. You won’t be able to see him anymore.”).
- Explain to them that every one dies. Death is part of the cycle of life. It means your loved one’s body is no longer working. A body cannot come back to life after dying.
- Do not overwhelm your child with too much information. Only give the details you feel they will be able to handle.

## **Help them express what they are feeling**

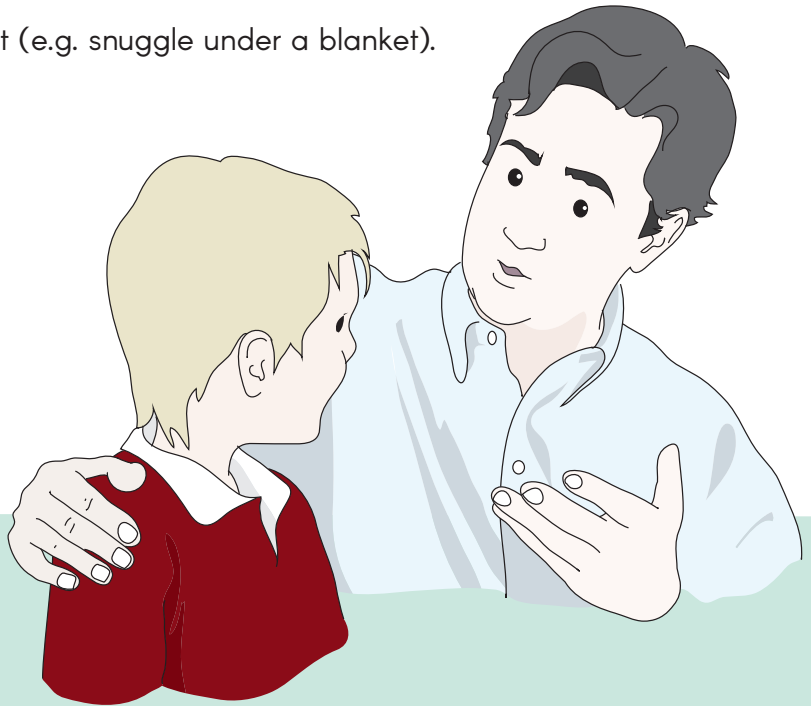
- Help them find the right words to understand their feelings. (e.g. “Do you feel sick to your stomach when you think of mom?”; “Are you kicking your doll because you are angry that grandpa is gone?”)
- Include them in family discussions.

## **Give them time to think about what you have told them**

- Listen to what they have to say.
- Answer their questions. It can be tempting to avoid certain details. No matter how tough this might be, it is important to offer answers to the questions they ask.
- Repeat information as needed. This will help them understand and make sense of what you are saying.
- Reassure them that death is mysterious. It is okay to feel confused and not have all the answers.

## **Surround them with love. Avoid adding to their stress.**

- Try to keep up your child's daily routine as much as you possibly can.
- Hold them; give them hugs and kisses.
- Offer physical comfort (e.g. snuggle under a blanket).



## **Keep their age and level of maturity in mind**

- Don't force them to say or do anything if they are not ready (e.g. they might want to create a special drawing or to share a special toy but not want to see the body at the funeral).
- Respect your child's needs (e.g. let them sleep with a photo of your loved one, if that might bring them comfort).
- Most children want to feel included, even if they are too young to remember the details of the death. Speak to a nurse or social worker about how a child younger than 3 years of age can say goodbye to someone they love.
- For children older than 3 years of age, ask them what they would like to do. Do not decide for them. Your child is learning about how to handle their grief from you.

# Does my child really understand what happened? How can I help?

It can be very difficult to know if your child has really understood what you have explained to them. You may have the impression that they have understood what has happened. At the same time, their questions may make you wonder if this is truly the case. For example, they might ask:

**“Will Daddy be home for Christmas?”**

**“You aren’t going to die, are you?”**

**“What really happens when you die?”**



The concept of death is very complex. Many children do not fully understand death before they are 12 years old. This means your child may only understand what has happened as he or she grows older and matures.

# Should I bring my child to the hospital? Should he or she see the body?

There are a number of ways you can prepare and support your child through a hospital visit. Here are a few suggestions:

- Tell them what to expect in advance. You could take a picture of the hospital bed to help describe what your child will see. A nurse or a social worker can help you with this, many of them have helped children and their parents prepare for this type of visit.
- Include your child in family discussions. This will help them understand what is happening.
- Allow children to see the dead body. Accompany them to provide support.
- Respect your child's decisions. If your child does not want to visit a parent in the hospital, explore their reasons why. Try to address your child's concerns. (e.g. Are they afraid of something? Do they understand what is happening?). They may also just need more time.
- Allow and help your child to say goodbye. (e.g. they could make a card or a drawing or they could write a letter). You might look at photos or videos together. Share memories. (See **page 51** for other examples of how you might help them express their feelings.)

# Should I bring my child to the funeral home or to the ceremony?

Just like the hospital visit, a child needs to be prepared for what they will see and who will be there.

- Tell them what to expect in advance (e.g. the order of events, what will happen).
- Include your child in the funeral planning. If they are old enough, ask them what role they would like to play (e.g. Do they just want to be with you? Do they want to make a drawing or tell a story about your loved one?).
- Identify a second adult (e.g. the other parent, a family member or a friend) your child trusts to help you. Remember you are grieving too. You might not have the time or energy to cope with all your child's needs during the funeral or ceremony.



# What might be a normal grief reaction for a child? What might they need?

Children and adults do not grieve the same way. When faced with stressful situations, children react differently from adults. Depending on his or her age, your child may experience a range of different feelings. They may act or act out in different ways.



## **How your child reacts may be affected by:**

- The support he or she has received from close friends and family.
- His or her age, personality and how mature he or she might be.
- His or her relationship with your loved one.
- Different losses he or she may have already experienced.
- How your loved one died and the events around his or her death.



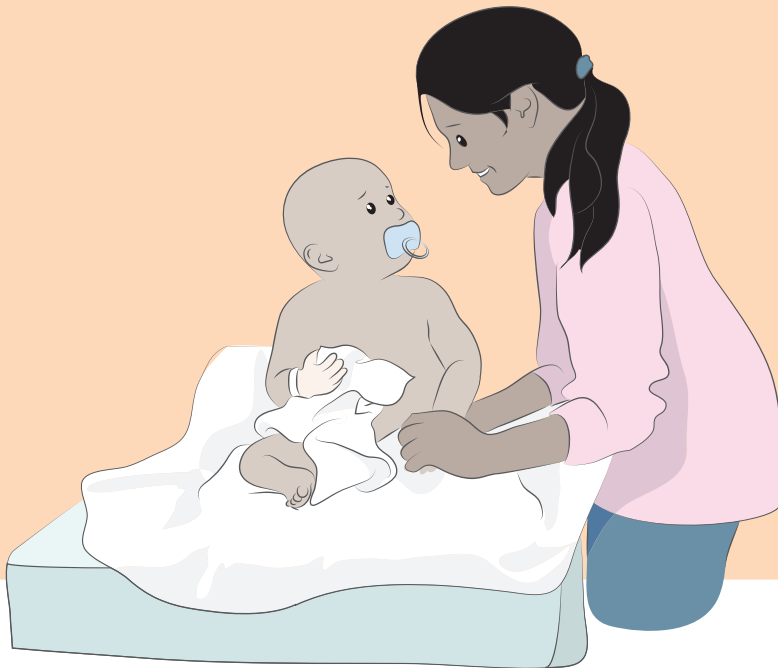
## Your child may:

- Have trouble talking about the death.
- Express strong feelings. They may feel confused, sad, angry, afraid, insecure, or guilty.
- Have temper tantrums, not want to do their chores, or wet their bed.
- Cling to you or want to be with you all the time. They may feel abandoned or anxious because they have been separated from their loved one. They may be worried that you will die too.
- Be afraid of things they were not afraid of before.
- Be lost in their thoughts.
- Grieve, then play (as if nothing has happened), then grieve again.
- Engage in “magical thinking” (e.g. they might believe that their thoughts or bad behaviour caused the person’s death).
- Get in to trouble at school (e.g. acting out, struggling with school work).
- Not eating or sleeping well.



Babies and young children will have very few memories of your loved one. However, sharing memories and stories with them will make a huge difference (e.g. “Remember when ... ?”). It will help to strengthen their connection to the person who has died as well as their sense of family belonging.

Remember: Death is very complex and everyone experiences grief differently. Your child will need time to adjust to this loss. While it may take weeks, months, or even years (grief has no time limit), rest assured your child will understand things better with age and time.

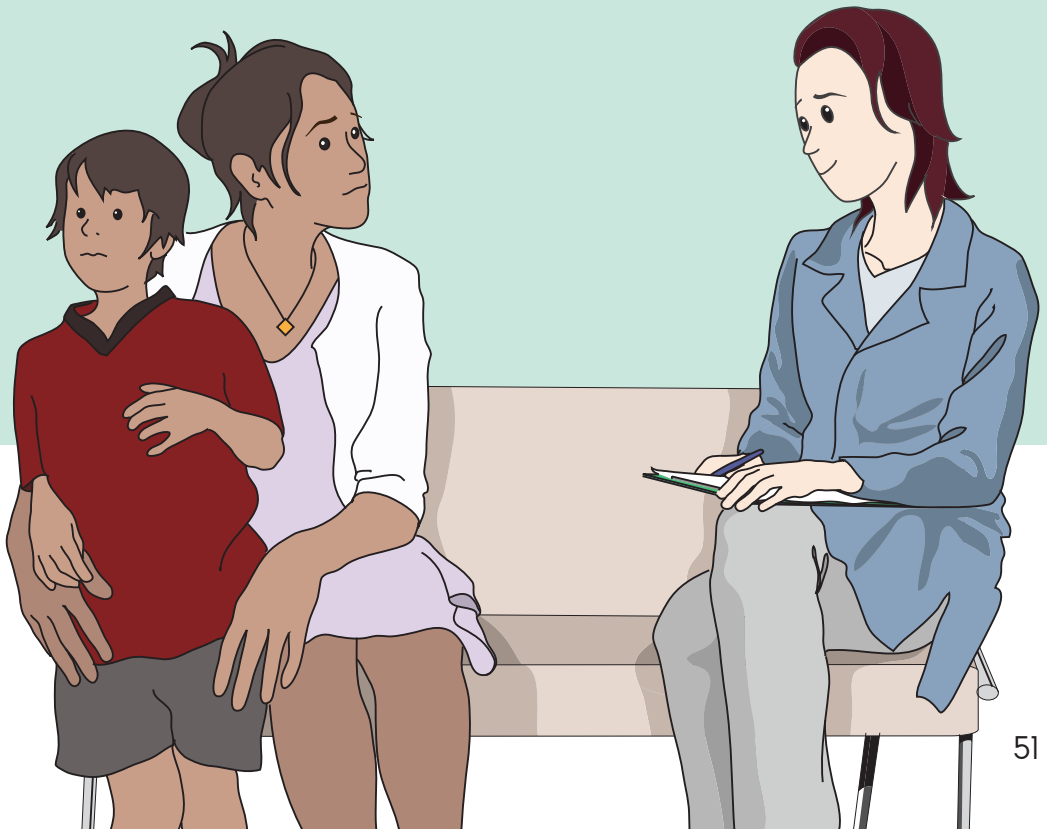


You may worry this experience has harmed (or traumatized) your child. Remember your child will grow emotionally from it, if he or she:

- Is allowed to grieve with your family.
- Has had their questions answered.
- Has had the chance to say goodbye to the person who died.

# When should my child return to school?

- Speak with the teacher to decide on the best way to get your child involved in school activities.
- Respect your child's energy levels, ask them to tell you when they are ready to re-start after school activities.
- Let your child know you love and support them. Create quiet times to talk or to create a keepsake in memory of the person who died.
- With the child's permission, speak with their friends as they can be a source of support.
- Consult with healthcare professionals as needed.



# How will I know if my child needs help?

As a parent, you know your child best. As such, you will know when they are struggling. If you notice any of the following changes and they last longer than 8 weeks, this might be a sign your child is having trouble coping. They are:

- **Having nightmares or not be able to sleep.**
- **Acting out at school or not able to complete school work.**
- **Clinging to you, and not talking to friends and family.**
- **Picking fights with family and friends.**
- **Acting like the person who has died.**



If you notice these changes in your child 8 weeks after the loved one's death, speak to your doctor, nurse or another health care professional you trust. You can also seek help from groups who are specialised in grief support for children (see **page 57** to learn more).



# Getting help

It is important to surround yourself with those you love while you grieve. However, sometimes we need help that our loved ones are not able to provide. If this is the case for you, it is perfectly normal to reach out to others.

Speak to your doctor, nurse, or another health care professional. You can also seek out help from groups who are specialised in offering grief support (see **page 56** to learn more).

Most Quebec CLSCs offer free and expert help. Your doctor or CLSC can also refer you to support groups in your area. Here, you may meet other people who have experienced similar losses. Some of these groups may also offer group or just one-on-one counseling sessions as grief (bereavement) support.

If you wish to speak with a psychologist, the Ordre des psychologues du Québec can give you list of psychologists offering services in your area. To contact them, call: **1 (800) 561-1223**. You can also visit: [www.ordrepsy.qc.ca](http://www.ordrepsy.qc.ca)

Check with your employer if you can benefit from an employee assistance program.



# Getting help

**Feeling overwhelmed or unable to cope?**

**Feeling suicidal or tried to commit suicide?**

**Do not wait. Get help right away.**

**Your health is important.**



## **Not sure where to turn?**

Speak to your family doctor, your local CLSC doctor, or any other health care professional you know and trust. They will be able to get you the help you need.

Reach out to a suicide prevention center. They offer support and information to families. You can call them directly (toll free): **1-866-APPELLE (277-3553)**. Your phone call will automatically be transferred to the closest regional suicide prevention center.

# Groups who offer support

For **Info-Santé** dial 811 on your telephone.

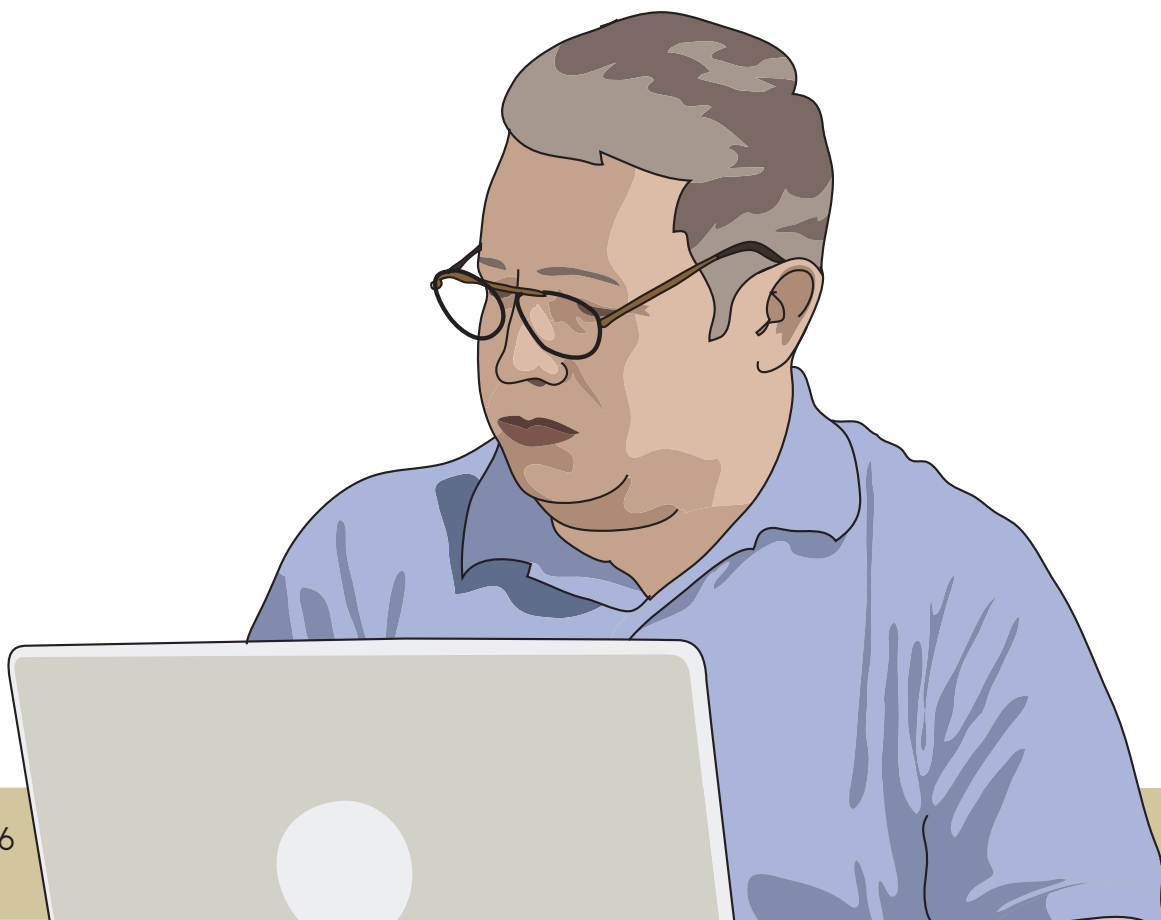
**La Gentiane** is a website designed to support people who are grieving. It offers a discussion forum for those wishing to express their thoughts and feelings.

[www.lagentiane.org](http://www.lagentiane.org)

**La Maison Monbourquette** is a free telephone service for people living in Quebec. Grief experts working here are available to listen and offer information on grief.

Grief Line: 1 (888) 423-3596 or (514) 523-3596

[www.maisonmonbourquette.com](http://www.maisonmonbourquette.com)





# Looking for more information?

**My Grief** is a website to support those who are grieving. The nine different sections allow you to explore and to understand your grief.

[www.mygrief.ca](http://www.mygrief.ca)

Questions about your grief can be sent to a healthcare professional on this website:

<http://virtualhospice.ca>

**The compassionate Friends of Canada, Inc.** is a website for those grieving the loss of a child, of any age. They have offices across Canada: 1 866-823-0141

[www.tcfcanda.net](http://www.tcfcanda.net)

**Parents Orphelins** represents all parents who experience a pregnancy or infant loss, regardless of the period when their baby died:

[www.parentsorphelins.org](http://www.parentsorphelins.org)

Please check online or with your **CLSC** for additional resources in your area.

For a list of CLSC locations go to:

[www.sante.gouv.qc.ca/en/repertoire-ressources/clsc/](http://www.sante.gouv.qc.ca/en/repertoire-ressources/clsc/)

**Quebec Order of Social Workers:** 1 888-731-9420

<https://otstcfq.org/>

**Quebec Order of Psychologists:** 1 800-561-1223

[www.ordrepsy.qc.ca/](http://www.ordrepsy.qc.ca/)

**Kids Grief** (resource on how to help grieving children) On-line only

[www.kidsgrief.ca](http://www.kidsgrief.ca)

**Suicide-Action:** 1 866-appelle (277-3553)

<http://suicideactionmontreal.org>

For more information:

<http://suicideprevention.ca/grieving/suicide-grief/>

**Crime Victims Assistance Centre:**

[www.cavac.qc.ca/english/index.html](http://www.cavac.qc.ca/english/index.html)

**Kids Help Phone: 1 800-668-6868**

<https://kidshelpphone.ca/>

# Suggested Readings

**“What to do in the event of death”** – This Quebec guide covers everything from how to register a death and choose a funeral home to financial help, and tips for filing an income tax report.

To get a copy, visit:

[www4.gouv.qc.ca/EN/Portail/Citoyens/Evenements/deces/Pages/accueil.aspx](http://www4.gouv.qc.ca/EN/Portail/Citoyens/Evenements/deces/Pages/accueil.aspx)

## For Adults

Baird, J., & Bowering, G. (Eds.). (2009). *The heart does break: Canadian writers on grief and mourning*. Random House Canada, Ont.

Bloom, L. A. (2004). *Mourning after suicide*. Pilgrim Press, India.

Davis-Ginsburg, G. (2004). *Widow to widow: Thoughtful, practical ideas for rebuilding your life*. Da Capo Press, Ont.

Didion, J. (2005). *The year of magical thinking*. Alfred A. Knopf, NY.

Grollman, E. A. (2011). *Talking about death: A dialog between parent and child* (2nd revised edition). Beacon Press, Mass.

Sell, C. (Ed.). (2010). *A cup of comfort for the grieving heart*. F & W Media Inc., MA.

# Suggested Readings

## For Teenagers

Canfield, J., Hansen, M. V., & Bergman, B. (1993). *Chicken soup for the soul: 101 stories to open the heart and rekindle the spirit*. Deerfield Beach: Health Communications Inc.

Fitzgerald, H. (2000). *The grieving teen*. Fireside Books, BC.



## For Children

Brown, L.K. & Brown, M. (1998). *When dinosaurs die: A guide to understanding death*. Brown and Company, NY.

Mundy, M. (1998). *Sad isn't bad: A good-grief guidebook for kids dealing with loss*. Abbey Press, Ind

Romain, T. (1999). *What on earth do you do when someone dies?* Free Spirit Publishing Inc., Minn.

Schwiebert, P. & Deklyn, C. (2006). *Tear soup: A recipe for healing after loss*. Grief Watch, OR.

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