A WITH LOVE, ALWAYS RESOURCE

The First Days After a Loss

For the days when everything is a blur

A longer, gentler guide for the first days after someone you love has died: why your mind feels foggy, what truly cannot wait and what can, the first calls and how to make them, and how to get through the nights, the quiet house, and the basics of a single day.

BEFORE WE BEGIN

A Letter From With Love, Always

Dear friend,

I lost my mom when I was twenty-nine, and I was her executor, which meant that in the same week I was learning how to live without her, I was also being handed folders, phone numbers, and questions I did not know how to answer. I remember sitting at her kitchen table with a notebook I kept losing, writing down things people told me and then having no memory of writing them. I remember someone asking what I wanted for lunch and feeling genuinely unable to answer, as if that simple question had been asked in another language. The fog was not weakness. It was what those days are.

What I wish someone had handed me then is something like this guide. Not a checklist to master, and certainly not a timetable for grief, but a calm voice saying: here is the very short list of things that cannot wait, here is the much longer list that can, and here are words for the calls you are dreading. If you read only one page today, let it be the sorting in Part Two. The rest will keep until you are ready for it.

With Love, Always offers peer support shaped by lived experience. This is companionship, not clinical counseling, and nothing here is a rule. Take what helps, leave what does not, and know that someone who has sat at that kitchen table, losing the notebook, is rooting for you.

PART ONE

The Blur: What the First Days Actually Feel Like

The Fog Is Real, and It Is Not Just You

Many people describe the first days after a death as moving through water, or watching their own life from a slight distance. Sounds seem far away. Rooms you have known for years look unfamiliar. You may walk into a room and have no idea why you went there, or find yourself standing at an open refrigerator with no memory of opening it. This blur is one of the most common experiences of early grief, and it is worth naming plainly, because unnamed it can feel frightening. Named, it is simply information: your mind is carrying something enormous, and ordinary functioning gets whatever energy is left over. The fog is not a sign that you are falling apart. It is a sign that something huge has happened to you.

Why Your Brain Cannot Hold Details Right Now

In the first days, your mind is doing triage. It is processing the fact of the death itself, often over and over, the way a tongue returns to a sore tooth. That work takes nearly everything you have, which is why details slide off: names of people who just introduced themselves, instructions the funeral home gave you an hour ago, whether you already told a story or only thought about telling it. This is why writing things down matters more now than it ever has, and why even that may not fully work. A notebook by the phone, one list in one place, a trusted person taking notes beside you: these are not signs of failure. They are the right tools for a mind that is, understandably, otherwise occupied.

Time Does Strange Things

The first days rarely feel like days. An hour on hold can feel endless, while an entire afternoon vanishes and you cannot account for it. People often lose track of which day it is, eat lunch at four, or realize they have been wearing the same clothes since the phone call came. None of this needs correcting with any urgency. Let the clock matter only where it truly has to, for an appointment or a service time, and let the rest of the hours be as shapeless as they are. Structure will return on its own, gradually.

You May Feel Nothing at All, and That Counts Too

Some people cry for days. Others feel strangely calm, even flat, and then worry that the calm means something is wrong with them or that they did not love enough. Please hear this clearly: numbness is a common response to shock, and it is not a measure of love. Feelings after a death do not arrive on schedule or in any particular order, and they do not perform for an audience. You may feel everything at the funeral home and nothing at the service. You may laugh at a memory in the kitchen and feel guilty about the laugh. All of it is within the wide, normal range of what human beings do when someone they love dies. There is no correct feeling to be having today.

Your Body Is Grieving Too

Grief is physical, especially at first. A heavy or hollow feeling in the chest, a stomach that will not settle, headaches, exhaustion that sleep does not fix, a jaw you discover you have been clenching all day. Appetite may disappear entirely or swing the other way. You may feel restless and unable to sit still, or so tired that showering feels like a major project. Treat these sensations the way you would treat recovery from any major physical event: with rest, water, simple food when you can manage it, and a great deal of patience. Your body has registered the loss too, and it deserves the same gentleness as your heart.

Everyone Around You Is Grieving Differently

One more thing that surprises people: the others who loved this person will not grieve the way you do. One family member will want to plan and organize. Another will go quiet. Someone will cry openly while someone else makes jokes at what feels like the wrong moment. These differences are not rankings of love, and they are not betrayals. They are temperaments meeting the same loss. Naming this early can prevent real damage, because families most often wound each other by mistaking a different style of grief for a wrong one. Give each other the benefit of the doubt this week, wherever you can.

PART TWO

What Cannot Wait, and What Can

The Honest Headline: Most Things Can Wait

Here is the sentence this whole guide is built around: in the first days after a death, far fewer things are urgent than it feels like. The feeling of urgency is real, because shock makes everything feel like an emergency and because well meaning people, offices, and inboxes will all present their item as the important one. But feelings of urgency and actual deadlines are different things. Almost nothing about a death must be decided or completed in the first forty-eight hours, and much of what will be pressed on you this week can safely wait until next week, or the week after, without harming anyone. Sorting, honestly, is the kindest skill you can practice right now.

What Truly Cannot Wait

The genuinely short list looks something like this. The proper authorities need to be notified of the death itself, which a hospital, hospice, or care facility often handles with you, and a funeral home needs to be chosen and called so your loved one can be brought into their care. The closest family members need to hear the news from someone who loves them, soon, and before they might hear it any other way. If there are children, animals, or dependent adults in the home, their care has to be covered today. If your loved one wished to donate organs or tissue, that is time-sensitive and the hospital can guide you. And anything involving immediate safety, medication, or a locked home that someone needs to enter belongs on today's list. That is close to all of it.

What Can Wait, Even If It Feels Urgent

Now the longer, more merciful list. Thank you notes can wait for weeks. Sorting belongings, clothing, and rooms can wait for months, and there are good reasons not to rush it. Most financial and legal paperwork moves on a timeline of weeks, not days, and offices that handle estates are used to grieving families taking time. Decisions about a home, a car, or large accounts should wait until the fog lifts, because fog is a poor adviser for irreversible choices. Even the obituary, the service details, and the wording of almost everything can usually wait a day or two longer than you fear. When in doubt, ask the professional in front of you one direct question: "What happens if this waits until next week?" The answer is very often: nothing at all.

A Simple Way to Sort Any New Demand

When something new lands on you, and things will keep landing, run it through three questions. Does someone I love need this today to be safe, cared for, or told the news kindly? Is there a real deadline, with a real consequence attached? And am I the only person who can do it, or can it be handed to someone else or to a later date? If the answers are no, no, and no, it goes on the later list without guilt. Keep that list on paper, in one place, so postponed things feel parked rather than forgotten.

Guard the Irreversible Decisions

If there is one caution worth underlining, it is this: try not to make permanent decisions in the first week unless one is truly required. Giving away belongings, selling a home, and making large purchases or large gifts all deserve a rested mind and, often, advice from someone neutral. Grief can make people generous, impulsive, avoidant, or unusually certain, sometimes all in one day. Waiting is not avoidance here. Waiting is how you protect the version of you who will live with these choices for years.

PART THREE

The First Calls

Start With the Closest Circle, In Person If You Can

The first calls are for the people who should never learn this news from a text, a social media post, or a distant relative: a spouse or partner, adult children, parents, siblings, and the one or two closest friends. Call them, or ask someone to sit with them in person if distance allows. Keep the circle small for the first round. You do not have to reach everyone you have ever known today, and trying to will leave you repeating the hardest sentence in your vocabulary twenty times before dinner. The wider circle can be reached tomorrow, or reached for you, which is what the messenger role later in this section is for.

Saying the Words Out Loud

For many people, the hardest part of the first calls is the first sentence, because saying it makes it real in a new way. It helps to know that the sentence can be very plain. You do not need a gentle preamble, a full explanation, or the story of the last days unless you want to tell it. A name, the fact, and one sentence of love is a complete call. If you cry through it, the call still counts. If you have to hand the phone to someone beside you halfway through, that counts too. Below are words written to be borrowed exactly as they are, for the calls people tell us they dread the most.

The hardest call, to the person closest to them:

> *"I am so sorry to be the one to tell you this, and I wanted you to hear it from me. They died last night. I am still taking it in myself, so I may not have many details yet. I just knew you needed to know right away, and that I did not want you to hear it from anyone else. I love you, and we will get through the next few days together."*

One Message That Tells Everyone at Once

After the closest circle, a single group message can carry the news further than your voice can today. It prevents the slow, painful drip of individual calls, and it stops the news from traveling in distorted versions. Keep it simple: the fact, one line about arrangements, and one line asking people not to call you directly just yet, if that is what you need. Send it to a defined group, family or close friends, and let the messenger named in the message take it from there.

A group text or message that tells everyone at once:

> *"With a very heavy heart, I am writing to let you all know that our beloved family member died yesterday. We are heartbroken, and we are still making arrangements, so we do not have service details yet. We will share them here as soon as we do. Please hold your calls to us for a day or two while we catch our breath. If you need anything, please reach out to the person I have asked to help us share news. Thank you for loving them, and for loving us."*

Ask One Person to Be the Messenger

This may be the single most helpful thing you do this week. Choose one steady person, a sibling, a cousin, a close friend, someone who is grieving a step removed from the center, and ask them to be the messenger: the one who spreads the news beyond the first circle, fields the returning calls and questions, corrects rumors, and passes only the truly important messages on to you. People are honored by this job more often than they are burdened by it, because it gives their love somewhere useful to go. Be specific about what you are asking, and give them the group message above as their starting text.

Asking one person to be the messenger:

> *"I need to ask you for something big, and it is okay to think before you answer. Would you be our messenger for the next few days? That means sharing the news with the wider family and friends, answering their questions as best you can, and only bringing me the things I truly need to hear. I cannot say the words twenty more times today, and knowing you are holding that for us would let me breathe. I will give you every update first, so you are never caught without answers."*

The Funeral Home Call Is Kinder Than You Fear

Many people dread calling a funeral home, imagining a sales conversation at the worst moment of their lives. In practice, the first call is usually short and gentle. You will be asked for your loved one's full name, where they are now, and whether any arrangements were made in advance. You do not need decisions about services, caskets, urns, flowers, or music on this call. It is acceptable, and common, to say: "I only know that I need to start. Please tell me the next one thing." A good funeral home will carry the sequence from there, one step at a time, and will expect you to be foggy. This is their everyday work, even though it is your extraordinary week.

Calling an Employer, Theirs and Yours

Two workplaces may need a brief call. Your loved one's employer should hear the news simply and soon, both out of courtesy and because benefits and insurance questions will eventually flow from there, though none of that needs solving on the first call. Your own employer needs to know you will be away, and even a rough estimate is enough. "I do not know yet" is an honest answer about return dates. If these calls feel like too much, they are excellent candidates to hand to your messenger or paperwork companion. A short call made by a calm helper loses nothing.

PART FOUR

Funeral and Service Choices, Without Rushing

You Have More Time Than the Moment Suggests

It can feel as though every service decision must be made in the first meeting, in the first hour, while you are still in shock. With very few exceptions, that is not true. A funeral home can care for your loved one while you take a day, or two, to think, talk with family, and sleep on the shape of a goodbye. Ask directly how much time you have before each decision is truly needed, and you may be surprised by the answer. Decisions made after one night of sleep are almost always decisions you will feel better about in a year. Slowness here is not indecision. It is care, for them and for you.

Questions Worth Asking Before You Decide Anything

A few questions can steady the whole process. Did your loved one ever say what they wanted, in writing, in conversation, or in reaction to someone else's service? Start there, because a known wish settles arguments and lifts guilt. What is included in the price you are being quoted, and what is extra? Ask for it in writing, and take the paper home. Who needs to be able to attend, and what do distance, health, or cost mean for the timing? And what does each option actually require of you this week, in energy and in money? You are allowed to ask every one of these more than once. Write the answers down, or have your companion write them, because the fog will not hold them for you.

Permission to Keep It Small and Simple

A service does not have to be large, formal, or expensive to be worthy of the person it honors. A small gathering at home, a short service with a handful of your loved ones, a graveside moment with one reading and one song: these are complete goodbyes, and for many families they are the truest ones. Love is not measured in chairs rented or flowers ordered. If finances are part of your worry, say so plainly to the funeral home; reputable ones will show you honest, simpler options without judgment. And if your loved one was a private person who would have hated a crowd, a quiet farewell is not doing less. It is doing right by who they were.

When Family Members Want Different Things

Disagreement in the first days is common, because grief makes everyone protective: of the person who died, of their own memories, and of their idea of a proper goodbye. If your loved one left any guidance, let it lead, and say so kindly: following their wishes is something everyone can unite behind. Where there is no guidance, try separating the essential from the personal. The essential decisions are few, and they belong most to those closest to the person who died. The personal expressions, a song, a reading, a display of photographs, can often make room for more than one voice. If voices rise, it is acceptable to pause the conversation overnight. Very few service decisions are harmed by one night of rest.

You Can Hold Something Later, Too

One option families often do not know they have: the farewell does not have to happen all at once, or all this week. A simple, private burial or cremation now can be followed by a fuller memorial gathering weeks or months later, when travel is possible, the fog has thinned, and you can plan something that truly sounds like them. For some families, the later gathering becomes the day they actually remember with warmth, precisely because it was not planned in shock. Choosing later is not choosing less. It is choosing the version of goodbye you have the strength to mean.

PART FIVE

Accepting Help by Handing People Specific Jobs

Why "Let Me Know If You Need Anything" Goes Nowhere

In the first days, nearly everyone who loves you will say some version of "let me know if you need anything," and nearly every grieving person answers "thank you" and never lets them know. This is not ingratitude. A foggy mind cannot generate a task list on demand, and asking feels like one more decision. The fix is not to try harder to think of things. The fix is to hand out standing jobs, specific and bounded, so that help flows without you having to summon it. The sections below are a menu. Choose two or three, name a person for each, and let the rest go.

Food: Let Someone Else Own the Kitchen

Give one person the food job entirely: coordinating meals from others, keeping a simple schedule so three dinners do not arrive on one night and none the next, stocking easy things you can eat without cooking, and quietly clearing the refrigerator as the days pass. Tell that person any allergies and the honest truth about what sounds edible, even if the list is short and strange. Food help fails when it is random and succeeds when it is coordinated, and coordination is exactly the kind of thinking you should not be spending yourself on this week.

Calls, Messages, and the Front Door

Your messenger already holds the outbound news. Consider a second helper for the inbound side: the person who answers the house phone or sits with your mobile, returns the condolence calls that need a response, keeps a list of who called and who sent flowers or food, and greets people at the door so you do not have to host your own grief. That written list matters later, when you want to know who showed up for you and the fog has taken the details. Protecting your quiet is a real job, and giving it to someone is not shutting people out. It is making sure you have anything left for the moments that matter.

The House, the Laundry, and the Small Machinery of Life

Life keeps generating chores in the middle of loss: dishes, laundry, mail piling up, pets to feed, bins to take out. These are perfect jobs to hand over whole, because they are visible, finite, and require no decisions from you. Let a trusted person run the house for a few days as if it were their own. If you are particular about certain things, say the one or two that matter and release the rest. The way someone else folds towels is not a problem you need this week.

A Paperwork Companion

Ask one organized, calm person to be your paperwork companion: someone who sits beside you at the funeral home and at any office visit, takes notes, keeps every document in one folder, writes down names and phone numbers and what was promised, and reminds you of the next small step so your mind does not have to hold it. This person does not make decisions for you. They remember for you, which in the first days is the more valuable service. Choose someone who can be in the room without needing to be comforted themselves, and tell them plainly that their notes and their steadiness are the gift.

Words for Handing Someone a Job

If accepting help feels awkward, borrow these words. Specific, warm, and honest beats vague and apologetic, and most people feel relief when a request has edges they can hold onto:

> *"Thank you for offering to help. I actually do have a job, if you are willing. Would you be in charge of food for the next few days, coordinating anyone who wants to bring something, so it does not all come at once? That would take a real weight off me. And please tell me honestly if it becomes too much. I would rather know than have you quietly overwhelmed."*

You are not imposing by asking clearly. You are answering the question every helper is silently asking, which is: how do I love this person in a way that actually lands? A named job is how.

PART SIX

The Quiet House and the Basics

The First Night

The first night deserves its own honest paragraph, because so many people dread it all day. The house may feel unbearably quiet, or ordinary in a way that feels wrong. Their side of the bed, their chair, the sounds that are missing: night removes every distraction the day provided, and the loss gets the whole room. There is no technique that makes the first night fine, and you do not need one. You only need to get through it, in whatever way works: a light left on, the television murmuring, a family member on the couch or on the phone, sleeping in a different room or not sleeping much at all. All of these are allowed. Morning will come, and you will have survived a night you were afraid of.

Living in the Quiet House

In the days that follow, the house itself becomes a landscape of reminders: the coat by the door, the cup in the sink, the message still saved on the phone. Some people need everything left exactly as it was. Others cannot bear certain sights and move a few things right away. Both responses are normal, and neither has to be explained or defended to visitors. One gentle suggestion: change only what you must for daily life, and leave the bigger sorting for later, when you can choose what to keep with a clearer heart. Belongings hold stories, and stories deserve decisions made by a rested you. For now, the house does not need to be solved. It needs to be lived in, gently, one room at a time.

Eating When Thinking Feels Impossible

Appetite is often one of the first casualties of shock, and decision making goes with it, which is why "what do you want to eat" can feel like an impossible exam question. Lower the bar until it is on the floor. Eat anything, at any hour, in any amount. Toast counts. Soup someone else made counts. A few bites, eaten because a kind person put them in front of you, count. Keep water nearby and sip it through the day, because grief and crying are dehydrating and a headache will make a hard day harder. If you are the one who usually cooks, release that role entirely for now. Feeding yourself simply is enough, and on some days, letting others feed you is the whole assignment.

Sleeping, or Resting When Sleep Will Not Come

Sleep in the first days is often broken, shallow, or strangely deep with vivid dreams. You may fall asleep exhausted and wake at three in the morning with your mind racing through details, conversations, and what ifs. This is common enough that it deserves to be expected rather than feared. Keep nights simple: the same few steps before bed, screens dimmed, the notebook by the bed so a racing thought can be written down and released until morning. If sleep will not come, resting in the dark with your eyes closed still does your body real good. And if you do sleep long and hard, that is not avoidance or anything to feel guilty about. It is a body and mind doing exactly what they need.

The Smallest Possible Basics

When everything feels impossible, shrink the day until it fits. The smallest possible basics look like this: drink some water, eat something, take any medication you normally take, step outside for two minutes of air, wash your face or shower if you can, and rest when your body asks. That is a full and respectable day in the first week of grief. Anything beyond it, a call returned, an errand run, a decision made, is extra, and there will be days with no extras at all. Productivity is not the measure of this season. Endurance is, and endurance is built out of exactly these small, unglamorous acts of care.

One Hour at a Time

If the days feel too long to face whole, stop facing them whole. Grief this fresh is survived in small units: this phone call, this meal, this hour, this evening. When a wave rises, and waves will rise at ordinary moments, in the grocery store, in the shower, at the sound of a familiar song, you do not have to solve it. Sit down if you can. Breathe slowly. Let it pass through, the way weather passes, because waves of grief do crest and then ease, even the enormous ones. Then take up the next small thing. You have already gotten through every hard hour so far, including the worst one. That is not a small record. It is proof, written in your own life, that you can do the next hour too.

YOUR TURN

My First Days, in One Place

Fill this in slowly, as things happen, or ask your paperwork companion or messenger to keep it for you. Short answers count. This page is a memory aid for a foggy week, not another obligation.

My first calls (who I need to tell, and who has been told)

Who made each call (the calls I made, and the calls someone made for me)

My messenger is (the one person spreading the news and fielding questions)

Who is handling what (food, calls, the house, paperwork, children or pets)

What cannot wait this week (the short list, and only the short list)

What can wait until next week (parked here, so my mind can let it go)

Service decisions so far (what is decided, what is still open, what I was quoted)

Notes I do not want to lose (names, numbers, promises, things people told me)

One small basic for tomorrow (the smallest kind thing I can do for myself)

If you are ever in crisis, please reach out right away. You can call or text the **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline** at **988** anywhere in the United States, or reach the **Crisis Text Line** by texting **HOME** to **741741**. Both are free, confidential, and answered by people who are there to listen, day or night.

These first days ask more of you than almost any days of your life, and you are meeting them while missing someone you love. Whatever got done today, and whatever did not, you are doing the hardest part simply by being here, one hour at a time. Let people help. Let most things wait. We will be here for the days after these, too.

With love, always