A WITH LOVE, ALWAYS RESOURCE

What Grief Can Look Like

There is no single way this goes

An honest, unhurried look at the many shapes grief can take: the waves, the numbness, the anger, the guilt, the relief, the fog, and the laughter that surprises you, so you can recognize your own experience and stop wondering if you are doing it wrong.

BEFORE WE BEGIN

A Letter From With Love, Always

Dear friend,

I lost my mom when I was twenty-nine and my dad when I was thirty-five, and if you had asked me beforehand what grief would look like, I would have described something simple and orderly: sadness, tears, and then, slowly, feeling better. What actually happened was stranger and much less tidy. I cried in my car over a song I did not even like. I went whole weeks feeling almost nothing and worried that the nothing meant I had not loved them enough. I got angry at people who were only trying to help. I laughed at my dad's funeral, at a story he would have loved, and then sat with a wave of shame about it in the parking lot. I forgot appointments, lost words in the middle of sentences, and once stood in my own kitchen unable to remember why I had opened the refrigerator.

None of that was a sign that I was grieving incorrectly. It was grief, in its real forms, and I wish someone had handed me a plain description of those forms early on, so I could have spent less energy judging myself and more energy simply getting through the days. That is what this guide tries to be. Inside you will find the shapes grief commonly takes, described honestly and without a schedule attached: the waves that arrive from nowhere, the numbness, the anger, the guilt, the surprising relief, the fog in your thinking, what grief does in the body, and the quiet grief for the future you expected. You will also find words you can borrow when other people hand you a timeline that is not yours.

With Love, Always offers peer support shaped by lived experience. This is companionship, not clinical counseling, and nothing here is a rule. Your grief will not look exactly like mine, and it does not need to. Take what sounds familiar, leave what does not, and know that if your experience is in these pages, you are not the only one living it.

When It Arrives Without Warning

Waves That Arrive From Nowhere

One of the first surprises of grief is that it rarely moves in a straight line. You can have a morning that feels almost ordinary, coffee, errands, a conversation you actually follow, and then something small and unremarkable undoes you completely: their handwriting on an old list, a stranger wearing their cologne, the empty passenger seat. The feeling rises fast, sometimes before you even understand what touched it, and it can be strong enough to take your breath or bring tears in a place you would never have chosen, like a checkout line or a work meeting.

These waves are not setbacks, and they do not mean you are back at the beginning. Think of them less like a report card and more like weather moving through. A wave says that something you love got touched, not that all your steadier hours were pretend. Most waves crest and ease within minutes, even the fierce ones, and it can help to treat them that way in the moment: find a place to sit or step aside, breathe slowly, let the tears come if they are coming, and remind yourself that this will soften. You do not have to explain a wave to anyone who witnesses one. "I am all right, I just need a minute" is a complete sentence, and the people worth keeping will accept it as one.

Over time, many people get better at recognizing their own weather. Certain songs, streets, seasons, and anniversaries announce themselves, and you can prepare for those a little: a quieter day around the hard date, a friend who knows, an exit from the gathering that might undo you. Other waves will stay unpredictable no matter how well you know yourself, and that unpredictability is not carelessness on your part. It is simply how a large love behaves in a world full of reminders. When a wave catches you in public and embarrassment arrives right behind the tears, try to remember that most witnesses are kinder than your embarrassment predicts. People who see a stranger cry over a song in a store mostly think one thing: someone is missing someone. They are right, and there is nothing shameful in being seen telling that truth.

Numbness and Feeling Nothing at All

Just as common, and far less talked about, is the stretch where you feel very little. The news has landed, the arrangements are made, everyone around you is emotional, and you are strangely flat, as if you are watching your own life from the next room. You might go through whole days on automatic, answering questions, signing papers, making small talk, and wonder with real worry what is wrong with you that you cannot cry. Nothing is wrong with you. Numbness is one of the mind's oldest kindnesses. When a loss is too large to take in all at once, the heart sometimes rations it, letting it arrive in amounts you can survive.

Numbness can also show up later, after the first intensity passes, and it can feel like a betrayal of the person who died. It is not. Feeling nothing for a while is not the same as caring nothing, and the love does not need tears every day to prove itself. Most people find that feeling returns unevenly, in odd moments and odd sizes, sometimes for the small things before the big ones. If a flat stretch worries you, treat it the way you would treat the waves: as one weather pattern among several, likely to change, and not a verdict on your heart. Rest, eat something real, and let quiet days be quiet without cross examining them.

Numbness can also make the practical world feel unreal in a way that is hard to describe to anyone who has not felt it. The funeral happens, the house fills and empties, thank you notes get written, and through all of it you may feel as though you are performing the role of a grieving person rather than actually being one. Some people worry that the flatness means the loss will hit them all at once later, like a debt coming due, and they brace for a collapse that never quite arrives in that dramatic form. More often, feeling returns the way it left: gradually, in pieces, at odd hours. A smell, a voice on an old recording, an empty chair in the evening light. When it comes, let it. When it does not, let that be too. Both are your heart pacing itself, and pacing is not the same as absence.

Grief in the Body

Grief is often described as an emotion, but anyone who has lived it knows it is also physical. Exhaustion is nearly universal, the kind of tired that a full night of sleep does not fix, because grieving is work your body is doing around the clock. Sleep itself may change in either direction: trouble falling asleep, waking in the early hours with your mind already racing, or sleeping far more than usual and still waking up unrefreshed. Appetite changes are just as common. Food may lose all appeal, or you may find yourself eating constantly and barely tasting any of it.

The body keeps its own list beyond that. Headaches, a tight chest, an aching back, a stomach that will not settle, a heaviness in the limbs, getting every cold that goes around. Stress and sorrow live in the body, and the body answers in the languages it has. None of this means you should ignore symptoms; anything new, severe, or persistent deserves a real conversation with a doctor, and grieving people are famously bad at making those appointments for themselves, so consider this your nudge. What it does mean is that you can stop being surprised or ashamed that loss hurts physically. Gentle basics help more than grand plans: regular meals even when they are small, water, daylight, a short walk, and rest taken before you are completely empty rather than after.

It can also help to tell the people close to you that the tiredness is physical, not a lack of interest in them. Grieving people often cancel plans, leave early, or go quiet in conversation, and the people around them can misread that as distance when it is really depletion. A simple sentence covers most of it: I am more tired than I look, and it is the grief, not you. And if you are the kind of person who has always pushed through, consider this your permission to treat this season the way you would treat recovering from a serious illness, because in every way that matters to your body, that is close to what is happening. Slow is not lazy right now. Slow is accurate.

PART TWO

The Feelings That Are Hard to Admit

Anger, in Every Direction

Anger surprises grieving people more than almost anything else, partly because it feels like the opposite of love and partly because there are so many directions it can point. You may be angry at the person who died, for leaving, for a choice they made, for the conversation you never got to finish, and that anger can feel so disloyal that you bury it instantly, where it tends to leak out sideways. You may be angry at doctors or a hospital, at a treatment that failed or a warning that came too late. You may be angry at God or at the universe itself, even if you have never thought of yourself as an angry believer or an angry doubter before. And you may be angry at yourself, which is often the sharpest anger of all.

Here is the plain truth underneath it: anger is frequently what helplessness feels like from the inside. Something enormous happened that you could not stop, fix, or undo, and anger is the mind pushing back against that fact. Feeling it does not make you ungrateful for the care they received, unfaithful to your beliefs, or disloyal to the person who died. It makes you a person who wanted them to live. Anger needs somewhere honest to go: a long walk, a candid page in a notebook, a trusted person who can hear it without flinching or fixing. What it does not need is your shame added on top of it. Name it, let it move, and notice that it almost always has grief standing right behind it.

One more thing about anger deserves saying plainly: it often aims at the safest available target, which is usually the person closest to you rather than the person actually responsible, if anyone even is. You may find yourself snapping at a partner, a sibling, or a friend who has done nothing but show up imperfectly, and then feeling worse about the snapping than about the anger itself. When that happens, a repair is worth making, and it does not need to be elaborate. I am sorry I took that out on you. I am angry at the situation, not at you, and I am still learning where to put it. Most people who love you will understand that sentence immediately, because many of them are carrying an anger of their own and have been waiting for permission to admit it.

Guilt and the What Ifs

If anger is loud, guilt is persistent. It tends to arrive as a loop of small, specific sentences. What if I had called that day. What if I had pushed harder for a different doctor, a sooner appointment, one more test. If only I had visited more, been more patient in the hard months, said the important things out loud instead of assuming they were understood. The loop can also run in the other direction, replaying the last ordinary conversation and wishing it had been a better one, as if love were graded on its final scene. Almost every grieving person we have ever sat with has some version of this loop. It seems to be part of the standard equipment of loving someone who died.

It helps to notice what the what ifs are really doing. They are the mind searching for a version of the story where you had control, because a story with control, even one where you failed, can feel safer than the truth, which is that so much of this was never in your hands. You made decisions with the information, energy, and humanity you had at the time. Hindsight hands you knowledge you did not possess then and asks why you did not use it, and that is not a fair question, in grief or anywhere else. When the loop starts, some people find it steadies them to answer it plainly, out loud or on paper: I did what I could with what I knew. I loved them, and they knew it in a hundred ordinary ways. The loop may still return. You are allowed to answer it the same way every time.

Guilt also likes to attach itself to the ordinary business of continuing to live. Eating a good meal, enjoying a friend's company, making a plan, even just having a day where the loss is not in the front of your mind can all get billed to you later as evidence that you should be doing this differently. It helps to notice the pattern for what it is. Guilt, for many grieving people, is love with nowhere to go, still trying to protect the person, still trying to be on duty. You are allowed to thank it for its service and set it down anyway. The measure of your love was the whole relationship, years of ordinary days, not a perfect performance in its hardest chapter.

Relief, and the Guilt That Follows It

Now for the feeling people confess in a whisper, if they confess it at all: relief. It is especially common after a long illness, months or years of watching someone you love suffer, of hospital chairs and hard phone calls and holding your breath at every decline. When death finally comes, alongside the sorrow there can be a quiet, unmistakable loosening. It is over. They are not hurting anymore. You can sleep without listening for the phone. And almost immediately, the relief is followed by a rush of guilt, because relief feels like something a loving person should never feel.

Please hear this clearly: relief is not the opposite of love, and it is not a wish that they were gone. It is almost always relief that the suffering has ended, theirs and, honestly, yours, because caregiving through a long decline is its own slow emergency and your body knows it even if your conscience will not admit it. Plenty of devoted spouses, children, and friends have felt exactly this and then punished themselves for it in silence. You do not have to join them. You can hold both truths in one sentence, because both are true: I am relieved the suffering is over, and I would give anything to have them back well. The guilt that follows relief usually fades when the relief is allowed to be spoken, to a trusted person, in a journal, or even just honestly to yourself.

Relief can take quieter forms too, and those deserve the same honesty. Relief that a difficult relationship no longer has to be navigated. Relief that a long season of worry about money, safety, or decline has ended. Relief, simply, that you no longer have to watch and wait for the worst phone call, because it has already come. These are human responses to hard circumstances, not character flaws, and naming them privately, without dressing them up, tends to take away most of their power to shame you. What you felt in the hardest years and what you feel now can both be true, and neither one rewrites the love.

Laughing, and Then Feeling Disloyal

Sooner or later, often sooner than anyone expects, something will be funny. A story at the gathering after the service. A memory with their timing written all over it. An ordinary joke on an ordinary Tuesday. You will laugh, really laugh, and then, a beat later, feel the floor tilt: how can I laugh when they are gone, what would people think, what does this say about me. Some people even catch themselves enjoying an afternoon, a meal, a friend's company, and feel the same disloyal pang, as if enjoying anything at all were a statement about the size of their loss.

It is not a statement about anything except that you are alive, and aliveness keeps happening even in a grieving house. Laughter is not the end of grief and it is not a betrayal of the person who died; very often it is one of the most faithful things you can do, because so many of our loved ones are woven into our sense of humor in the first place. The laugh and the ache will share the same hour many times in the years ahead, sometimes the same minute. Let them. A heart that laughs at lunch and cries in the car is not confused or finished or failing. It is doing the full job of loving someone who is gone while still living in a world that contains jokes, good food, and people who make you snort at exactly the wrong moment. Your loved one, of all people, would probably not want the jokes to stop on their account.

The Quiet, Ongoing Parts

Brain Fog and Forgetfulness

Somewhere in the first months, many grieving people become convinced their mind is slipping. You walk into a room and lose your errand. You read the same paragraph three times. Words you have used all your life go missing mid sentence, names slip, appointments evaporate, and you find the milk in the cupboard and your keys in a coat you do not remember wearing. It can be frightening, especially if you are usually the organized one, the one other people rely on to remember everything.

What is usually happening is simpler and kinder than the fear. Your mind is running an enormous background process, day and night, and it has less left over for the foreground. Attention, memory, and focus are being spent on the loss whether you feel actively sad in that moment or not. This is a season to lower the bar and add scaffolding without shame: write everything down in one notebook or one phone note, set alarms for things that used to be automatic, keep the important objects in one landing place by the door, and let trusted people double check the big decisions. Postpone what can be postponed, especially large financial or legal choices, when your thinking is at its foggiest. For most people the fog thins gradually as the months pass, unevenly, like the rest of grief. If forgetfulness is severe, worsening, or worrying you, that is worth raising with a doctor, plainly and without embarrassment. Asking is part of taking care of yourself, not a confession that you are falling apart.

It may help to warn the people who count on your sharpness. A short, honest note to a manager, a sibling, or a friend can prevent a foggy mistake from turning into a misunderstanding about your commitment or your competence: I am dealing with a loss, my memory is not at its best right now, please put important things in writing and do not be offended if I ask twice. Most people respond to that kind of candor with more grace than you expect, and the ones who have grieved themselves will recognize the fog instantly. You are not lowering the standard for your whole life. You are posting an honest sign for one hard season.

Grieving the Future You Expected

There is a second grief folded inside the first, and it often goes unnamed, which makes it lonelier than it needs to be. Alongside the person, you have also lost a future: the retirement that was finally going to slow down, the grandchild they will never hold, the wedding they were supposed to attend, the ordinary phone calls ten years from now that you had always assumed would simply keep happening. Parents lose the grown up version of a child they will never meet. Partners lose the shared plans that organized their whole sense of what came next. Adult children lose the years when the relationship was finally going to become something easier and closer.

This grief for the future tends to ambush people at milestones, theirs and everyone else's. Other people's weddings, graduations, and family photos can sting in a way that feels ungenerous until you understand it: you are not begrudging them their day, you are grieving the version of that day that was supposed to include your person. Naming this second loss helps. It lets you grieve it on purpose instead of being ambushed by it: this is the part where I am sad about the future, not only the past. Some people find a small ritual useful at milestones, a seat saved, a photo carried, a name spoken in the toast, not to darken the day but to tell the truth inside it. The future will be rebuilt, slowly and differently, and it is allowed to become good again without that goodness erasing what was lost.

This is also why certain questions from well meaning people can land so hard. When someone asks about your plans, your next chapter, whether you will move or travel or start again, they may be picturing an open road while you are still standing in the place where the map changed. You do not owe anyone a rebuilt future on a deadline, and you do not need to apologize for answering honestly: I do not know yet, and I am not ready to know. The not knowing is not a failure of imagination. It is an accurate report from a life that is still being rearranged, and rearrangement of this size is slow work.

Other People's Timelines for You

At some point, usually sooner than you are ready for, the world will begin quietly handing you a schedule. It rarely arrives as a direct order. It comes as a surprised look that you are still tearful, a hopeful comment that you seem to be doing better, a suggestion that getting out more, clearing out the closet, or giving it a year will settle things. Sometimes it comes from near strangers. Sometimes, harder, it comes from your own family, or from inside your own head at two in the morning, where the timeline can be cruelest of all. Underneath most of these comments is love or discomfort rather than malice, but that does not make them land softly on a person who is still counting the loss in weeks.

You are allowed to answer, and you are allowed to keep the answer short. The sentences below are written to be used exactly as they are. Pick the one that fits the moment, say it once, kindly, and let it stand. You do not need to win the argument or educate anyone about grief in the grocery store.

When someone implies you should be further along:

> *"I know it can look slow from the outside. From the inside, this is the pace it is actually going. I am not stuck, and I am not in a hurry. I am grieving someone I will love for the rest of my life, and I am doing it as well as I can."*

When advice arrives that you did not ask for:

> *"I can tell you are saying that because you care, and I am going to be honest that advice is not what helps me right now. What helps is company. Sit with me, ask me about them, and let me be exactly where I am today."*

When you need the subject changed, or the visit ended:

> *"Today is a tender one, and I am going to protect it a little. I am not up for talking about how I am doing, but I would love to hear what is happening with you, or we can call it a short visit and try again another day."*

No Timeline and No Finish Line

Here is the part this whole guide has been walking toward. Grief does not run on a schedule, and it does not have a finish line where a certificate is issued and you are pronounced done. It changes, certainly. For most people the sharpest edges soften, the waves space themselves out, laughter gets easier to trust, and life genuinely does grow larger around the loss. But softer is not the same as over, and a hard day three years from now, at a song or a smell or an empty chair, does not mean you have failed at healing. It means you loved someone, and love has a long memory.

So measure your progress, if you measure it at all, by gentler questions than "Am I over it yet." Can I get through more ordinary days than I could last season. Can I say their name out loud more easily. Can I hold a good memory without it immediately turning into only pain. Those are real movements, and they count even when nobody else can see them. Your grief belongs to you and to the relationship it came from, which no one else lived from the inside. Let it take the shape it takes, and the time it takes. There is no single way this goes, and there never was.

YOUR TURN

What My Grief Has Looked Like

There are no right answers on this page, and no one else ever needs to see it. Write in fragments if that is what you have. Come back to it in a few months if you like; what has changed, and what has not, is information worth having.

What my grief has looked like lately (the waves, the quiet, the fog, all of it counts)

The feeling I judge myself for most (and what I would say to a friend who felt it)

Where grief shows up in my body (sleep, appetite, energy, aches)

A future moment I am grieving too (the day, the plan, the ordinary thing)

What I want people to understand (in one or two honest sentences)

One small kindness I can offer myself this week (sized to the energy I actually have)

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.

Whatever your grief looks like today, the flat morning, the sudden wave, the laugh you did not expect, it is not evidence that you are doing this wrong. It is evidence that you loved someone and that the love did not end when they died. Be patient with the shape it takes in you. We will be here while it changes, and on the days when it does not seem to change at all.

With love, always