

10 Myths About Grief

Myth #1: Grief is a problem to be solved or resolved

As painful and sorrowful as grief can be, ultimately, grief is a healthy adaptive factor that allows us to eventually and resiliently reconcile to the fact of the loss.

Myth #2: Grief is always done in stages

The well-known Kubler-Ross model of five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance) has been largely debunked. It is problematic in that, research shows that, overwhelmingly, most people don't experience predictable phases of emotional states that result in 'resolution.'

University of Memphis psychologist Robert A. Neimeyer confirms this analysis. He concluded in his scholarly book *Meaning Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss* (American Psychological Association, 2001): "At the most obvious level, scientific studies have failed to support any discernible sequence of emotional phases of adaptation to loss or to identify any clear end point to grieving that would designate a state of 'recovery.'"

As many of you already know through your own experience, grief is often experienced as a cascade of a wide range of feeling ~ from deep pain, anguish, anger, fear, hurt, disbelief, shock, and even relief, sometimes within the scope of a very short time. We each have our own ways and means of grieving ~ I encourage you to trust and respect yours.

Myth #3: Grief always has a timeline and a time limit

It is a myth that grief has a timeline and a time limit. Indeed, waves of grief in its many forms may resurge throughout our lives from time to time. This is completely normal and psychologically necessary in that we're always adjusting and adapting to the reality of the loss in the context of who we're becoming and our life stage. These up swells of grief long after the loss don't indicate 'unresolved' grief but the depth of the attachment.

Myth #4: Older people grieve less or differently than those who are younger.

Myth #4 is a particularly insidious one for older people in that, up until relatively recently, it was generally believed that, since we've experienced so many losses already, we become somewhat inured to loss and therefore grieve less. Human attachment being as critical to our sense of identity, meaning, and belonging as it is, we suffer its loss, regardless of age.

Myth #5: When someone dies, we're only ever grieving that one loss

Myth #5 asserts that we grieve one loss at a time, as though each were a separate and singular event. The research strongly indicates that, whenever we experience loss, grief can reactivate past losses to the degree that it can feel as though we're grieving them again. This does not mean that we haven't 'resolved' our grief for past losses but merely that our psyches are integrating the current loss with those past. Therese Rando posits that this phenomenon is the psyche's way of reassuring our conscious selves that we have survived the anguish of loss before and will do so again.

Myth #6: Grief is always solely an emotional experience

The myth that grief is always solely an emotional experience is challenged by the statistical evidence to the contrary: given that the bereaved often report generalized pain and disruptions to sleeping and eating as well as cognitive challenges such as poor memory or difficulty concentrating, deep disruptions to their spiritual experience, and significant changes to their social engagement, grief can be thought of as a multi-dimensional complex sequelae of responses that leaves no part of our selves unaffected.

Myth #7: The full reality of the loss is always immediately understood.

The 7th myth, that the full reality of the loss is always immediately understood is, like many of the previous myths, been largely debunked by the research.

Instead, most people experience grief as a series of waves, not only of emotional, psychological, cognitive, and spiritual impacts but as waves of realization of what the loss may mean, not only for one's self but for shared relationships, for where we are in our life stage development, and for our future. Sometimes the full impact of the loss isn't fully understood until many years later.

Myth #8: The grief process always begins at the moment of loss or death.

Myth #8 suggests that we begin grieving the moment we learn of the loss or death. Delayed grief is not uncommon and is often associated with needing to attend to the exigencies of the moment, for example, tending to a child or an urgent work situation.

Myth #9: The intensity of grief correlates to the intensity of love.

Myth #9 is regrettable in that it doesn't account for all the nuances and variations between people, the nature of their relationships, and the highly subjective nature of grief.

Myth #10: Life should return to normal.

Myth #10 suggests that life should return to normal and, if it doesn't, it implies that something is wrong with us and/or our grieving process. Grief irrevocably changes us and our relationship to the world around us. Grief is a threshold over which we cross and cannot return.