

ADF MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

# GRIEF



JOINT HEALTH COMMAND  
VICE CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE FORCE



Everyone at some point in their life will experience grief in some form following a loss. Grief is a simple word to describe a complex and often bewildering reaction we experience following a loss.

Feelings of grief are not only evoked by death or injury. Other loss events such as divorce or separation, miscarriage, loss of job, possessions, home, health or status can also cause grief. The grief process involves a range of reactions that can leave you feeling helpless, upset, sad, confused and/or angry. There is no right or wrong way to cope with grief and the information provided here is designed to help you recognise many of the common responses to loss. This information can help you to cope better with your feelings, as intense and unfamiliar as they may be.

# Why do I feel so bad?

Grief is a complex process. Initially you may feel numbness, disbelief, and shock. During this period you may continue doing things for a person who has left or died. This state helps to protect you from the intense hurt of the loss. You may be surprised that the world around you continues unchanged even when you feel that your world has been shattered. As days, weeks and months go by, some of these initial reactions will pass as other stages of grief follow, including anger, sadness and finally acceptance. Along the way, you may notice some of the following reactions:

## Physical reactions

Physically your body may ache with tension. You may experience stomach pains, headaches, changes in appetite, low energy and motivation, or poor sleep. Other reactions may include:

- crying
- breathlessness
- nausea
- agitation and restlessness
- being particularly susceptible to viruses, rashes or other minor illness.

## Emotional/Behavioural reactions

Some people have experiences like seeing their loved one's face in a crowd, dreams involving the loved one or crying when they smell a particular scent. These experiences are common and normal for someone grieving the loss of a loved one. It is very common for people, after a sudden loss, to imagine all the 'what ifs'. Some may even feel guilty or blame themselves for the loss. Some may feel their lives have lost a purpose and some bereaved people describe wanting to die themselves. Other common emotional and psychological reactions experienced during grief include:

- poor concentration
- fear
- panic
- depression
- guilt
- anger
- sadness
- withdrawal from friends and family.

## How to best cope during the grieving process

- try not to make any life-changing decisions while you are still grieving
- recognise your grief as a natural part of the healing process
- use writing, art and music to let out your feelings
- be patient and give yourself time. There is no set time-frame for the grief process
- expect that although you will continue to get better, along the way there will be good and bad days
- ask for help and support from family members, friends, or support groups
- talk with others who have experienced loss and grief
- tell people what helps and what doesn't
- attend any memorials or ceremonies that may be held in remembrance of the loved one, as these provide an opportunity to talk to others who may be feeling the same way you are
- be cautious. Grief cannot be side-stepped or cured by medication, alcohol or drugs. However, it may be appropriate to talk to your treating medical practitioner or a psychologist if you feel your symptoms are prolonged or unbearably intense
- if it is relevant to you, practice religious and/or spiritual activities such as prayer and/or meditation.

## What to avoid during the grieving process

Strategies such as trying to distract yourself by keeping extraordinarily busy, or making significant changes in your life such as moving house or changing job, may feel good at the time, but may not be the most useful approach to coping with your grief. Similarly, avoiding talking or thinking about the loss may only prolong the grieving process. It is much better to allow yourself time in the day to think and talk to others about your loss and remember your loved one in ways that are meaningful to you.

## How best to support a grieving person

- be patient and offer support in different ways and at different times
- keep in touch and don't avoid them
- be prepared to spend time listening
- share memories and stories and don't be afraid to talk about the loss
- encourage them to accept help and support and assist them to find information
- take care of yourself - be fair to yourself as well as the person who needs support.

## Where to seek help

Your chain of command is a primary resource that can provide advice, referral and support. You can also contact your local on base Health Centre, Mental Health Professional, Chaplain or the Duty Officer/Officer of the Day for immediate assistance and referrals.

The **ADF Mental Health All-hours Support Line** (ASL) is a confidential telephone service for ADF members and their families available 24/7 on **1800 628 036** or if calling from overseas +61 2 9425 3878.

If you are away from base, or for out-of-hours assistance, you can call **1800 IMSICK** to locate the nearest support.

**Chaplains** are connected to all units in Australia and can provide support and appropriate referrals.

**The ADF Health and Wellbeing Portal**  
[www.defence.gov.au/health/healthportal/](http://www.defence.gov.au/health/healthportal/)

The Portal is an online health information resource tool for all current and ex-serving ADF Members and their families.

## Other Resources

**Defence Family Helpline (1800 624 608)**

[www.defence.gov.au/dco](http://www.defence.gov.au/dco)

The Defence Family Helpline is your first point of call for support, information and connection with your community. The Helpline is available 24/7 for ADF Members and their families, and is staffed by qualified human services professionals including social workers and psychologists.

You can also email the Helpline on [DefenceFamilyHelpline@defence.gov.au](mailto:DefenceFamilyHelpline@defence.gov.au) and receive a response within 24 hours.

**Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (MVCS)**. This 24-hour service is available to veterans of all deployments and their families on **1800 011 046**.