



# Common Ways of Responding to Grief

Grief points to the reality of living in a fallen world and the impact of its brokenness. When we experience loss of someone beloved and or something meaningful, our expectations about our life are deeply disappointed and shattered. Loss points to the problem of our fallenness as depicted in Genesis about how humanity's sin ruptured their relationship with a holy God. Consequently, humanity faces the reality of pain and death. Death is a permanent change and as for those who are left behind, they have to live with this ongoing reality. All loss changes our personal landscape in unpredictable ways, and each one of us handles such losses differently. Because experiencing loss is painful and uncomfortable, people avoid the mourning process by creating strategies to cope on their own. As you come alongside those who are grieving, it might be helpful to be aware of the ways people try to avoid grief.

## Common ways of avoiding grief

**Postponing grief** - people delay and dismiss their feelings and expressions of grief in hopes that they will go away over time.

**Displacing grief** - people transfer unwanted or difficult feelings onto other objects or people and blame them as the cause of those feelings.

**Replacing grief** – people invest in other activities to avoid the grief. Common examples of this are overworking, getting involved in premature relationships and other intense pursuits.

**Minimizing grief** – people avoid feeling the full weight of grief by downplaying its impact. Common examples of this is through intellectualizing the grief or even spiritualizing it by using faith as a way to avoid truly facing the loss.

**Somatizing grief** – people stop feeling the grief which manifests in bodily symptoms of pain or illness that may or may not be associated with the real presence of physical illness.

Caregivers at times also struggle with how best to support others who grieve.

## Common ways of mishandling someone's grief

**Avoiding the topic of their grief** - just as the person grieving avoids the pain, we may fear bringing more pain and consequently, we may also avoid the topic with them.

**Offering familiar forms of platitude and comfort** - we mean well because we want the one who experienced the loss to feel better, so we say something that feels right and is commonly said. But these forms of communication often bring more pain and loneliness to the sufferer because they are not in sync with their experiences.


**Expecting the person to move on quickly** - the grief of loss can come in waves, and it might take a person a longer time than expected to process their pain.

**Getting defensive when the person questions their faith** - during times of deep loss, the grieving person might question God or start to doubt their faith. In such situations it's easy to get defensive and defend God or the faith. This can further isolate the grieving person that needs spiritual care and the experience of God's presence through people that can hear them and extend grace.

So as caregivers it's good to understand factors that influence your grieving as well as others.

### Factors that influence grieving

- Personality and any intrinsic personal traits that affect the way you grieve.
- Expectation of how you should grieve.
- History of losses and traumas, including any hardships or challenges you are experiencing at the time of the loss.
- Family of origin's attitudes, patterns, and rituals around grieving and loss.
- How your family handled emotions, especially negative, difficult, and conflicting emotions.
- Religious and spiritual beliefs.
- The presence of family and/or other communities, especially the availability of support from social or family circles.
- Cultural background and beliefs about grieving and death.



Being mindful of the ways people in your care cope with the pain of grief can help you understand the unique ways they might be responding to the loss in their lives. As you become aware of their coping strategies and the other factors that are affecting them, you can help process their emotions and experiences and walk alongside them as they mourn. Jesus understood the value of mourning when he stated, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted," and even as we turn to him for compassion, we can facilitate the mourning process and comfort those who suffer loss.

\*Material from this tool has been adapted from the Redeemer Counseling Grief Curriculum.