



Grief and loss can put people at risk of becoming depressed. While the signs and symptoms of grief and loss are similar, it's important to recognise the differences so the affected person can receive the most appropriate help.

WHAT IS LOSS?

The death of a loved one is a common situation that causes grief. However, when there are big changes in a person's life, it can sometimes feel as if something has been taken away. Losses can be large or small and the effect of multiple losses builds up.

Common experiences of loss:

- relationship changes – separation, divorce, death of a loved one
- job changes – unemployment, retrenchment, retirement or demotion
- change of role – e.g. children leaving home – or becoming a carer and having one's freedom restricted
- loss of health through illness, disability and/or ageing
- miscarriage, infertility – disappointment at not being able to have a child
- separation from family and friends – e.g. moving interstate or overseas.

WHAT IS GRIEF?

When a person experiences a significant loss, it's usually followed by a period of grief. Grief has no set pattern – and the length and severity of each grief experience is different for everyone. There are however, common reactions and responses:

- shock, feeling of numbness
- disbelief – “It can't be real.”

- confusion and trying to make sense of it – “Why has this happened to me?”
- anger – feeling deserted
- pining and yearning – wanting whatever was lost to be returned
- guilt – “I wish I had done things differently.”
- a sense of isolation and fear at facing the rest of life alone.

The experience of grief is normal, but it's still painful and a person experiencing grief needs support. If grief is not recognised and acknowledged, it can fester and have a detrimental effect on a person's health and wellbeing.

GETTING THROUGH GRIEF AND LOSS

What you can do to help yourself

Although the pain of grief cannot be alleviated quickly, there are many things you can do to help yourself through a tough time.

- **Stay connected** to friends and family, and use support groups. Because some friends may be inclined to stay away, let them know how often you'd like to see them. Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- **Stay healthy** – Eat healthy meals, exercise regularly, get a good night's sleep and keep use of drugs and alcohol to a minimum.
- **Manage stress** – Lighten your load by asking friends, family members or work colleagues to help you with some chores or commitments. Relaxation and gentle exercise can be helpful.
- **Make time** to participate in enjoyable activities.

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How to help a person who is experiencing grief and loss

- **Listen** to what the person says about what he/she is going through, but also talk about everyday things because life goes on.
- **Support** the person by initiating contact and by being available.
- **Encourage** the person to get help if he/she feels stuck.

IS THIS DEPRESSION?

It can sometimes be difficult to know whether:

- you are just feeling down because you are experiencing grief and loss
- or you have symptoms of depression.

Depression can certainly be triggered by loss and it may share symptoms with grief, such as difficulty controlling emotions and moods, feeling teary and tired – however, it's important to recognise the difference between normal grieving and depression.

Depression is more than just a low mood or feeling sad. A person is likely to be depressed if:

- they get no enjoyment from any aspect of life
- it's difficult to do things – like getting up in the morning
- they have no energy and drive
- they are avoiding people
- they're not looking after themselves properly – eating, washing etc.
- they feel ashamed or guilty.

A diagnosis of depression can be made if a person has persistently, for more than **TWO WEEKS**:

- Felt sad, down or miserable most of the time
- Lost interest or pleasure in almost all usual activities.

If the answer is 'YES' to either of these questions, complete the symptom checklist below. If the answer was not 'YES' to either of these questions, it is unlikely that the person has a depressive illness.

- Lost or gained a lot of weight OR Had a decrease or increase in appetite
- Sleep disturbance
- Felt slowed down, restless or excessively busy
- Felt tired or had no energy
- Felt worthless OR Felt excessively guilty OR Felt guilt about things they should not have been feeling guilty about
- Had poor concentration OR Had difficulties thinking OR Were very indecisive
- Had recurrent thoughts of death

Add up the number of ticks for the total score: _____

References: American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, 4th ed (DSM-IV). Washington, DC: APA 1994; and, International classification of diseases and related health problems, 10th revision. Geneva, World Health Organisation, 1992-1994.

It's important to note that **scores provide only a rough guide as to whether someone has depression.** If you have ticked five or more of these statements, a health professional should be consulted.



TREATMENT FOR DEPRESSION

There is a range of effective treatments for depression including psychological therapies and/or medication.

Psychological treatments help a person to change negative thought patterns and feelings. A person can learn new ways to react to people and situations. This can help recovery and prevent depression from returning.

Medication – If someone is only mildly or moderately depressed, psychological treatment alone may be effective. However, if depression is severe, medication is often necessary as well. Antidepressants can take seven to 21 days to work effectively and should not be started or stopped without medical advice. Sometimes sleeping tablets can be helpful, but only for a short time.

It's important to remember that with the right treatment, most people recover from depression.

It's not always easy to help someone who is experiencing depression. It can be hard to know what to say or do. Below are some tips.

- Recognise that depression is an illness that needs treatment.
- Don't be afraid to talk to the person about how he/she is feeling.
- Spending time with the person lets them know someone cares and understands them.
- Encourage the person to seek professional help from a doctor or a mental health professional.
- Take care of yourself. Supporting someone with depression can be demanding. Family members and friends should take time to look after themselves.

WHERE TO GET HELP

- Talking to a **doctor** who is a General Practitioner (GP) is a good first step. In some cases, the person may be referred to a mental health specialist like a psychiatrist or psychologist. For a list of GPs with expertise in treating depression and related disorders visit the *beyondblue* website www.beyondblue.org.au and click on Get Help.
- **Psychiatrists** are doctors who specialise in mental health. They can make medical and psychological assessments, conduct medical tests and prescribe medication. Some psychiatrists use psychological treatments like Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT).
- **Psychologists, Social Workers and Occupational Therapists** specialise in providing non-medical (psychological) treatment for depression and related disorders.

A rebate can now be claimed through **Medicare** for psychological treatments if you have a mental disorder and a GP, psychiatrist or paediatrician refers you to a registered psychologist, social worker or occupational therapist. For a list of mental health professionals who provide treatment for people with mental health problems for which a Medicare rebate can be claimed, see below:

- Clinical Psychologists: www.beyondblue.org.au under Get Help
- Psychologists: www.psychology.org.au under Find a Psychologist
- Mental Health Social Workers: www.aasw.asn.au under Find a Mental Health Worker
- Mental Health Occupational Therapists: www.ausot.com.au under Find a Mental Health OT

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MORE INFORMATION

www.beyondblue.org.au

Information on depression, anxiety and related substance-use disorders, available treatments and where to get help

beyondblue info line 1300 22 4636

Information on depression, anxiety and related substance-use disorders, available treatments and referral only (local call)

www.youthbeyondblue.com

beyondblue's website for young people – information on depression and how to help a friend

Suicide Helpline – Victoria

1300 651 251 or www.suicidehelpline.org.au

24 hour counselling, crisis intervention, information and referral (local call)

Lifeline

13 11 14

24 hour counselling, information and referral (local call)

Lifeline's Information Line

1300 13 11 14

Mental Health Information Service

National Association for Loss and Grief – NALAG

VIC: www.nalagvic.org.au or free call 1800 100 023 (rural) (03) 9650 3000 (metro)

NSW: www.nalag.org.au or (02) 6882 9222

The Compassionate Friends

1800 641 091

24 hour telephone information, referral and service for people who have a lost family member

GriefLink

www.grieflink.asn.au

Web-based information and referral around grief and loss

Suicide Call Back Service

1300 659 467

Provides counselling, information and referral to people at risk of suicide and those concerned about someone else's behaviour

ARAFMI (Association for Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill)

Provides information on support services for families and friends of people with mental illness and/or psychiatric disability

QLD www.arafmiqld.org

NSW www.arafmi.org

SA 08 8271 6288

TAS <http://home.iprimus.com.au/rafmi>

VIC www.arafemi.org.au

WA www.arafmi.asn.au

Carers Australia

02 6122 9900 or www.carersaustralia.com.au

Information and resources for carers

Relationships Australia

1300 364 277 or www.relationships.com.au

Provides relationship support

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PO Box 6100, Hawthorn West VIC 3122

T: (03) 9810 6100

beyondblue info line 1300 22 4636

F: (03) 9810 6111

E: bb@beyondblue.org.au

W: www.beyondblue.org.au