

A photograph of a beach with waves crashing onto the shore under a cloudy sky. The sky is filled with large, dark, dramatic clouds, with some light breaking through near the horizon. The ocean is a mix of dark and light tones, with white foam from the waves washing onto the dark sand. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

# *Understanding Grief*

**UAB** MEDICINE

*It has now been a couple of months* since the death of your loved one, and your journey through grief has most likely felt like an emotional rollercoaster. We're still here for you at UAB Hospital and want to continue to offer you our support. The following guide may help you understand many of the different ways that grief can affect your life. It offers you ways to find more support, information related to grief support groups offered in the Birmingham area, and guidance on where to turn for support if you live outside of Birmingham. We've also provided a list of books and Web sites that may be useful to you.

Should you wish to contact someone here at the hospital, please call us at 996-7095 (toll-free, 866-321-7095) or e-mail [familysupport@uabmc.edu](mailto:familysupport@uabmc.edu).



# The Signs and Symptoms of Grief

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## Physical effects

You may feel a variety of physical responses to the loss of your loved one. It's important that you take care of yourself, which means having regular checkups and being aware of the many physical symptoms that are common to the grief process.

- *Shock*
- *Numbness*
- *Increased heart rate*
- *Tightness in the chest and throat*
- *Dry mouth*
- *Feelings of fatigue*
- *Irritability*
- *Difficulty sleeping*
- *Weight gain/loss*
- *Headaches, muscle aches, or stomach problems*
- *Depleted immune system, leading to more colds, flu, and allergies*
- *A feeling of "aching arms" after the loss of an infant*

*How you can help yourself:* See your doctor regularly; eat a healthy diet; avoid alcohol, caffeine, and drugs; exercise; get a good night's sleep.

## Mental effects

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Many mental reactions are common responses to loss. While these feelings can seem overwhelming, they're entirely normal and should decrease in intensity with time.

- *Inability to concentrate and/or remember things*
- *Shock, disbelief, denial*
- *Apathy, depression, lack of motivation*
- *Relief*
- *Guilt*
- *Loss of meaning or purpose*
- *Feelings of having seen, heard, or felt the presence of the deceased*
- *Dreams of the deceased*
- *Feelings of "going crazy"*

*How you can help yourself:* Use sticky notes to remember things; be forgiving of yourself; nurture a sense of humor; remember that these feelings are normal.

## Emotional effects

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During times of grief, sudden and drastic emotional changes are very common. Certain situations like a song or a smell or eating certain foods may trigger memories of your loved one, resulting in intense emotional reactions.

- *Crying without warning and for no apparent reason*
- *Feeling moody and irritable*
- *Feeling overwhelmed*
- *Feeling isolated from friends and family*
- *Feelings of relief, sometimes followed by feelings of guilt*

*How you can help yourself:* Allow time for your emotions to surface; write your feelings down in a journal; write songs or poetry; listen to music that helps express your emotions; seek positive influences; give yourself permission to laugh and feel happy.

## Social effects

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Life is different as you face it without the presence of your loved one. This can mean finding a new identity without your spouse, parent, child, or other significant relation, which can lead to a number of unfamiliar feelings.

- *Feeling like no one understands*
- *Feeling like your grief depresses others*
- *Feeling hesitant to try new things*
- *Finding it difficult to make the transition to a “new identity” without the deceased*

*How you can help yourself:* Surround yourself with people who really care about you and are helpful, and limit time with people who aren't; do what is most healthy for you; allow flexibility and give yourself room to change your mind; be gentle with yourself.

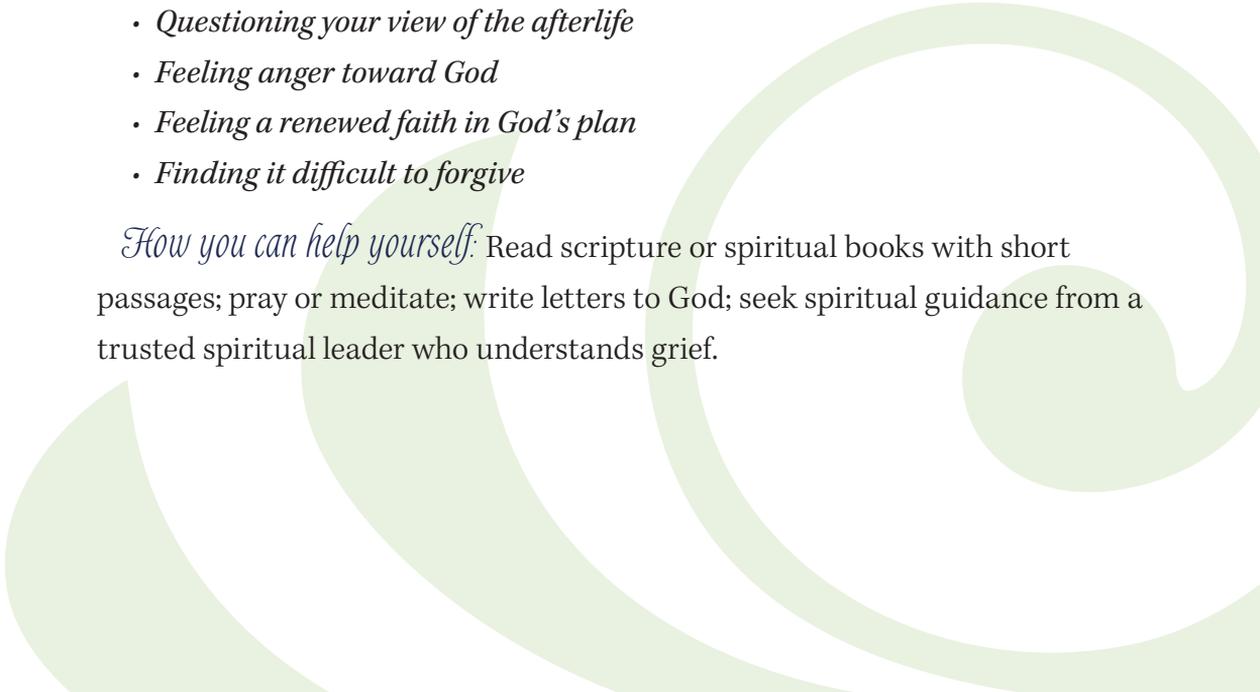
## Spiritual effects

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The spiritual effects of grief can be among the most worrisome. Know that they're common and will be resolved with time.

- *Questioning religious or spiritual beliefs*
- *Questioning the existence of God*
- *Questioning your view of the afterlife*
- *Feeling anger toward God*
- *Feeling a renewed faith in God's plan*
- *Finding it difficult to forgive*

*How you can help yourself:* Read scripture or spiritual books with short passages; pray or meditate; write letters to God; seek spiritual guidance from a trusted spiritual leader who understands grief.



# The Mourner's Bill of Rights

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D. (REPRINTED WITH AUTHOR'S PERMISSION)

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*Though you should reach out* to others as you do the work of mourning, you should not feel obligated to accept the unhelpful responses you may receive from some people. You are the one who is grieving, and as such, you have certain “rights” no one should try to take away from you.

The following list is intended both to empower you to heal and to decide how others can and cannot help. This is not to discourage you from reaching out to others for help, but rather to assist you in distinguishing useful responses from hurtful ones.

*1. You have the right to experience your own unique grief.*

No one else will grieve in exactly the same way you do. So when you turn to others for help, don't allow them to tell what you should or should not be feeling.

*2. You have the right to talk about your grief.*

Talking about your grief will help you heal. Seek out others who will allow you to talk as much as you want, as often as you want, about your grief. If at times you don't feel like talking, you also have the right to be silent.

*3. You have the right to feel a multitude of emotions.*

Confusion, disorientation, fear, guilt and relief are just a few of the emotions you might feel as part of your grief journey. Others may try to tell you that feeling angry, for example, is wrong. Don't take these judgmental responses to heart. Instead, find listeners who will accept your feelings without condition.

*4. You have the right to be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits.*

Your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you feeling fatigued. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Get daily rest. Eat balanced meals. And don't allow others to push you into doing things you don't feel ready to do.

*5. You have the right to experience “griefbursts.”*

Sometimes, out of nowhere, a powerful surge of grief may overcome you. This can be frightening, but is normal and natural. Find someone who understands and will let you talk it out.

*6. You have the right to make use of ritual.*

The funeral ritual does more than acknowledge the death of someone loved. It helps provide you with the support of caring people. More importantly, the funeral is a way for you to mourn. If others tell you the funeral or other healing rituals such as these are silly or unnecessary, don't listen.

*7. You have the right to embrace your spirituality.*

If faith is a part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. Allow yourself to be around people who understand and support your religious beliefs. If you feel angry at God, find someone to talk with who won't be critical of your feelings of hurt and abandonment.

*8. You have the right to search for meaning.*

You may find yourself asking, “Why did he or she die? Why this way? Why now?” Some of your questions may have answers, but some may not. And watch out for the clichéd responses some people may give you. Comments like, “It was God's will,” or, “Think of what you have to be thankful for,” are not helpful, and you do not have to accept them.

*9. You have the right to treasure your memories.*

Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of someone loved. You will always remember. Instead of ignoring your memories, find others with whom you can share them.

*10. You have the right to move toward your grief and heal.*

Reconciling your grief will not happen quickly. Remember, grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself and avoid people who are impatient and intolerant with you. Neither you nor those around you must forget that the death of someone loved changes your life forever.



# *How to Help Children Live After a Loss*

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*Children can be happy* and live life normally after the death of a loved one, but it may take time. All children are different. For some children, grief begins when they first learn that a parent, sibling or grandparent is dying or has died. For others, it could be a year before the process of grief begins. A child's age, his or her understanding of death, and how close he or she was to the person who died will affect the depth of his or her grief. The child's grief may also depend on the cause of death. Was it expected? Was there time to say good-bye, or was the death sudden, as in a suicide or automobile accident?

About two months have gone by since the loss of your loved one. If your child hasn't yet returned to a normal routine in his or her life, you might consider help from people who understand the many ways that children deal with loss in their lives. Sometimes a child just needs to talk to someone about his or her feelings. Even very young children can express how they are feeling through their play.

## *Infants and toddlers*

Even though infants and toddlers don't understand death, they can sense the sadness of their caregivers. They can also sense a change in the normal routine of the home. You may notice a change in their moods and sleeping and eating patterns. The best way to help young children is to try to keep daily routines. The routines may be different than before the death occurred, but that's okay. If your young child can't be at home, he or she needs at least to stay in one place, if possible, rather than being moved constantly. This is a time when your child needs to be hugged and given a lot of attention. You may need to ask for another caring adult, a family member or friend, to help you care for your child.

### *Three to six years*

Children age three to six may think that the person who has died will come back. They don't understand that death is permanent. They may ask you the same questions over and over. They may even be concerned that the loved one who died is cold or hungry. A child at this age may have bad dreams, may be afraid to be alone, or may not appear to be upset at all. You can help your child by answering his or her questions, even when they've already been answered. Talk about the difference between sleep and death. Make sure the child knows where you are, if you're leaving, and when you're coming back. As with infants and toddlers, daily routines are important for children at this age.

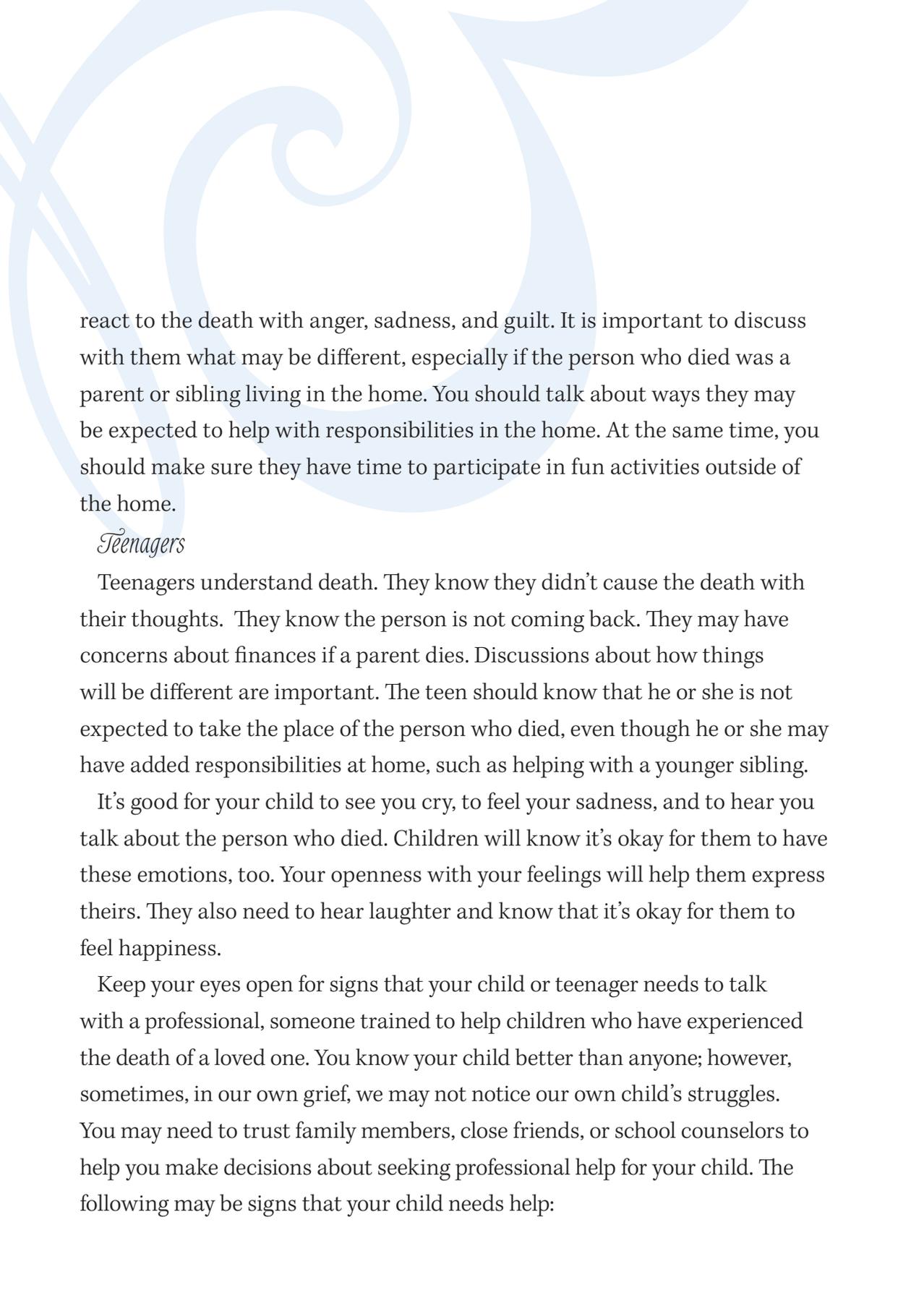
### *Six to nine years*

From around age six to nine, children may still have trouble understanding the reality of death. They may believe that death can be "caught," like a cold. They may even believe that the person who died may come back. They also may feel responsible for the person's death; during a time of anger, they may have wished the person dead, and now it's happened. A child at this age may have lots of questions about the cause of death and what happens when someone dies. If a parent has died, they may fear that something will happen to the surviving parent. If this is the case, you can reassure your child that you're going to be there to take care of him or her. Make sure your child knows that his or her thoughts did not cause the person to die.

You can help a child at this age by listening and correcting any confusion he or she might have about death. You can also give the child opportunities to talk about happy memories he or she may have. For some children, drawing and writing are helpful, especially if the child can't express his or her feelings by talking with others.

### *Nine to twelve years*

As children age, they have a better understanding of death. Children from nine to 12 years of age may be afraid that their own bad behavior may have caused the death. Make sure they know they are not responsible. They may



react to the death with anger, sadness, and guilt. It is important to discuss with them what may be different, especially if the person who died was a parent or sibling living in the home. You should talk about ways they may be expected to help with responsibilities in the home. At the same time, you should make sure they have time to participate in fun activities outside of the home.

### *Teenagers*

Teenagers understand death. They know they didn't cause the death with their thoughts. They know the person is not coming back. They may have concerns about finances if a parent dies. Discussions about how things will be different are important. The teen should know that he or she is not expected to take the place of the person who died, even though he or she may have added responsibilities at home, such as helping with a younger sibling.

It's good for your child to see you cry, to feel your sadness, and to hear you talk about the person who died. Children will know it's okay for them to have these emotions, too. Your openness with your feelings will help them express theirs. They also need to hear laughter and know that it's okay for them to feel happiness.

Keep your eyes open for signs that your child or teenager needs to talk with a professional, someone trained to help children who have experienced the death of a loved one. You know your child better than anyone; however, sometimes, in our own grief, we may not notice our own child's struggles. You may need to trust family members, close friends, or school counselors to help you make decisions about seeking professional help for your child. The following may be signs that your child needs help:

## Signs that your child needs help

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*Changes in sleep patterns.* Your child may have trouble going to sleep or may sleep more than usual.

*Changes in diet.* Your child's eating habits may change. Watch for a dramatic weight gain or loss.

*Seeming unusually fearful or anxious.* Young children may be very clingy. They may be afraid to sleep alone right after the death.

*Failing grades in school.* It's expected that grades might drop during a prolonged sickness or immediately after a death. However, at this point, the grades should be back to normal.

*Aggressive play.* A child's anger may be apparent through aggressive play.

*Risky behavior.* This behavior may be seen more in older children and teenagers.

## How you can help your child

- *Be sensitive.*
- *Listen.*
- *Let them know that you have sad days, too.*
- *Help them remember by talking about the loved one.*
- *Involve them in planning ways to remember the loved one on the anniversary of their death and on their birthday.*
- *Keep things as normal as possible.*
- *Let them know that life will get better.*

# Self-Assessment of Grief

*You may be wondering* if you need professional help to cope with the loss of your loved one. The following questions are meant as a guide to help you look at yourself, honestly evaluate your progress through the grief process, and determine whether professional help may be needed. Professional help and support groups can be beneficial as you cope with your grief.

**Do you feel you need more support from your family and friends?**

YES  NO

**Have you increased your use of alcohol, tobacco, drugs, or medication not prescribed to you; or are you using more medication than your prescription calls for?**

YES  NO

**Are you satisfied that you are eating and sleeping well?**

YES  NO

**Do you feel, since the death of your loved one, that the intensity of your grief has progressively gotten worse?**

YES  NO

**Are you satisfied with your level of energy to work, socialize, volunteer, do housework, participate in hobbies, etc.?**

YES  NO

**Since the death of your loved one, are you having any increased financial, health, work, or relationship problems?**

YES  NO

**Have you experienced more than one significant loss in the past year?**

YES  NO

No absolute formula of “yes” and “no” will tell you whether you should seek professional help, but these questions can act as an assessment of your emotional state during the grieving process. Refer to the provided list of support groups and other resources to help you work through your grief. Remember that you are unique; everyone grieves differently, and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Be as patient and understanding with those around you as you hope they will be with you.



# *Grief Support Groups in the Birmingham Metro Area*

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The following is a list of some of the grief support groups and agencies in the Birmingham area. There are many specific types of groups offered at various times and locations across the city. Please call first or check the website for current groups and times. This is a partial listing of grief support groups; local hospices and churches also offer grief support groups. Please call or email our Family Support Line (see inside cover for contact information) if you need help finding a group or individual counseling that is right for you.

## Alabama Grief Support Foundation

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[www.alabamagrief.org](http://www.alabamagrief.org)

A non-profit organization that offers compassionate education and guidance through support groups, individual sessions, cooperation with community, schools and religious groups and other means. All services are provided free of charge. Multiple sites and times offered.

Phone: 205-870-0336

Main office address: #3 Office Park Circle, Suite 104A, Birmingham, AL 35223

Email: [alabamagriessupp@bellsouth.net](mailto:alabamagriessupp@bellsouth.net)

## The Amelia Center

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[www.ameliacenter.org](http://www.ameliacenter.org)

A non-profit organization that provides grief support for children, teenagers and families anticipating or grieving the death of a parent, grandparent, sibling, close relative or friend, as well as support for parents or grandparents grieving the death of a child or grandchild. Individual and family counseling and support groups are offered free of charge.

Phone: 205-251-3430

Address: 1513 4th Ave. So., Birmingham, AL 35233

## The Beginning Experience/New Beginnings

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[www.birminghambeginningexperience.org](http://www.birminghambeginningexperience.org)

Beginning Experience (BE) Ministry is an interdenominational peer ministry designed to assist in grief recovery and personal growth for the divorced, widowed, and separated of this community. All who are in need of grief support from the loss of a marriage/relationship are welcome to participate. Weekly programs consist of ten week sessions.

Phone: 205-969-8509

Address: Groups meet at Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church, 1728 Oxmoor Road, Homewood, AL 35209

## Community Grief Support Service

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[www.communitygriefsupport.org](http://www.communitygriefsupport.org)

A non-profit corporation organized for the purpose of providing compassionate individual counseling, education, and support groups for bereaved persons in the greater Birmingham metropolitan area. Multiple types of groups and sites offered free of charge.

Phone: 205-870-8667

Main office address: 1119 Oxmoor Rd., Homewood, AL 35209

Email: [cgss333@bellsouth.net](mailto:cgss333@bellsouth.net)

## Survivors of Suicide Bereavement Group

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[www.suicideaftercare.org/alabama](http://www.suicideaftercare.org/alabama)

This website offers a source for suicide survivors support groups offered across Alabama In Birmingham:

S.O.S. Bereavement Group

3600 Eighth Avenue South, Suite 501

Birmingham, AL 35222

Contact: Dr. Judith Harrington

Crisis Center: (205) 323-7777

Direct line: (205) 226-2400  
judithharrington@att.net  
www.crisiscenterbham.com

SOSL - Survivors of Suicide Loss Group  
648 Narrows Point Way  
Birmingham, AL 35242  
Contact: Sue Matthews (205) 908-2989  
or Lynn Schlyer (205) 317-8891  
smatthews@desinn.net  
llschlyer@yahoo.com

#### FINDING HELP OUTSIDE OF BIRMINGHAM

- *Check with your local hospice to see if they have support groups.*
- *Check with your local church or synagogue for support groups.*
- *Get individual help from a professional (social worker, counselor, psychologist, etc.).*
- *Check out local mental health clinics.*
- *Check with your funeral home; many provide support groups, lending libraries, and counseling services.*

If you feel the need to talk to someone IMMEDIATELY

- *In Birmingham, call the Crisis Center at (205) 323-7777*
- *Nationally, call National Suicide Prevention, (800) 273-TALK (8255)*



# Recommended Books

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## Grief in general

- Grollman, Earl. *What Helped Me When My Loved One Died*  
Grollman, Earl. *Living When a Loved One Has Died*  
Rando, Therese. *How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies*  
Tatelbaum, Judith. *The Courage to Grieve*  
Feinberg, Linda. *I'm Grieving as Fast as I Can*

## Death of a parent (for adult children)

- Edelman, Hope. *Motherless Daughters*  
Myers, Edward. *When a Parent Dies: A Guide for Adults*

## Death of a child or infant

- McCracken, Anne. *A Broken Heart Still Beats: After Your Child Dies*  
Rosof, Barbara. *The Worst Loss: How Families Heal from the Death of a Child*  
Schwiebert, Pat. *When Hello Means Goodbye*  
Faldet, Rachel. *Our Stories of Miscarriage: Healing with Words*  
Ilse, Sherokee. *Empty Arms*  
Kohner, Nancy. *When a Baby Dies: The Experience of Late Miscarriage, Stillbirth, and Neonatal Death*  
Peppers, Larry. *How to Go On Living After the Death of a Baby*  
Gilbert, Kathleen. *Coping with Infant or Fetal Loss: The Couple's Healing Process*  
Wunnenberg, Kathe. *Grieving the Child I Never Knew*  
Nykiel, Connie. *After the Loss of Your Baby: For Teen Mothers*  
Floyd, Gregory. *A Grief Unveiled: A Father's Journey*

## Books for adults talking to children about death

- Grollman, Earl. *Talking about Death: A Dialogue Between Parent and Child*  
Grollman, Earl. *Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers: How to Cope with Losing Someone You Love*  
The Dougy Center. *35 Ways to Help a Grieving Child*  
Krementz, Jill. *How it Feels When a Parent Dies*  
Fitzgerald, Helen. *The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide*  
Huntley, Theresa. *Helping Children Grieve*

## Books for children

### FOR YOUNG CHILDREN:

Buscaglia, Leo. *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf*

Viorst, Judith. *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney*

Kramsney-Brown, L & Brown, M. *When Dinosaurs Die*

Stickney, Doris. *Water Bugs & Dragonflies*

Rylant, Cynthia. *Dog Heaven*

Companion Press. *How I Feel: A Coloring Book for Grieving Children*

Simon, Norma. *The Saddest Time*

### FOR PRETEENS:

Mellonie, Bryan & Ingpen, Robert. *Lifetimes*

White, E.B. *Charlotte's Web*

Douglas, Eileen. *Rachel and the Upside Down Heart*

Whelan, Gloria. *Forgive the River, Forgive the Sky*

### FOR TEENS:

Hughes, Lynn B. *You Are Not Alone: Teens Talk about Life after the Loss of a Parent*

Cobain, Bev. *When Nothing Matters Anymore*

Gunther, John. *Death Be Not Proud: A Memoir*

Gootman, Marilyn. *When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens about Grieving and Healing*

Kolf, June Cerza. *Teenagers Talk About Grief*

## Sudden and unexpected death

### FOR ADULTS:

Lord, Janice Harris. *No Time for Goodbyes: Coping with Sorrow, Anger, and Injustice After a Tragic Death*

Cole, Beth Vaughn. *Dealing with Sudden and Unexpected Death: A Handbook for Survivors*

Parkinson, Frank. *Post-Trauma Stress: A Personal Guide to Reduce the Long Term Effects and Hidden Emotional Damage Caused by Violence and Disaster*

### FOR CHILDREN:

Heegaard, Marge. *When Something Terrible Happens*

Rubel, Barbara. *But I Didn't Say Goodbye*



## Recommended Web Sites

[www.nhpco.org](http://www.nhpco.org) *The national organization for hospice care in the United States; has information about hospice care and grief resources*

[www.ameliacenter.org](http://www.ameliacenter.org) *Birmingham's children's grief center, an outreach of Children's Hospital; offers child and family support groups, individual counseling, and more. Modeled after The Dougy Center in Oregon, [www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org). This Web site has many resources related to loss*

[www.grievingchild.org](http://www.grievingchild.org) *The Dougy Center's Web site for grieving children*

[www.fireinmyheart](http://www.fireinmyheart) *"Fire in My Heart, Ice in My Veins" is an online journal for teenagers in grief*

[www.i-remember.org](http://www.i-remember.org) *An online journal for adults in grief*

[www.griefnet.org](http://www.griefnet.org) *Online support groups for all types of loss, many other resources*

[www.nationalshareoffice.com](http://www.nationalshareoffice.com) *Web site devoted to helping those who have been affected by the death of their baby through pregnancy loss or stillbirth or within the first few months*

[www.hygeia.org](http://www.hygeia.org) *Infant loss resources, articles, and personal stories*

[www.misschildren.org](http://www.misschildren.org) *Mothers in Sympathy and Support*

[www.mend.org](http://www.mend.org) *Mothers Enduring Neonatal Death*

[www.climb-support.org](http://www.climb-support.org) *Center for Loss in Multiple Birth*

[www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org) *Addresses the death of a child of any age*



