

DISMANTLING THREE GRIEF MYTHS



We are continually awed by the wisdom of each grieving child, teen, and adult who walks through our doors. One of the biggest lessons we've learned from them is how painful expectations can be for those in grief. At Dougy Center, we work to create a safe place for people to chart their way through grief, free from the opinions of others.

Many people initially contact us because they fear that they or their children aren't grieving the right way. They worry their thoughts, feelings, and actions aren't aligned with what they've read or heard from others about how people should grieve. In listening to these families describe their concerns, we've identified three common myths about grief that create pressure for those dealing with a loss to think, behave, or feel a certain way.

MYTH #1: WE GRIEVE IN STAGES

You might be familiar with the five stages of grief developed by Elisabeth Kübler Ross in 1969. These stages came out of research Dr. Kübler-Ross did with hospital patients who were dying. Somewhere along the way, these stages were adopted by the bereavement world as a model for those who were grieving a significant death. While the emotions connected to each stage, including shock, anger, protesting, depression, and acceptance, are valid and common reactions, they don't unfold linearly. People feel one, all, or none of these emotions over the course of grief. This model sets unreasonable expectations and leaves people worried they are doing something wrong if they don't methodically work their way through each stage. Participants in our support groups describe

a variety of other images and metaphors that better describe how they experience grief. Many say their grief is similar to ocean waves, with strong feelings coming and going. Others talk about grief having a rush hour when their emotions pile up and feel stuck. These participants make it clear that grief doesn't unfold in a straight line, but rather ebbs and flows in different ways for everyone.

MYTH #2: THERE'S A RIGHT (AND WRONG) WAY TO GRIEVE

Similar to the first myth, grieving people face tremendous pressure from themselves and others to act and feel in a particular way. Children, teens, and adults often say, "I think I'm doing this wrong. Is it okay that I...", and even, "You're going to think I've lost it but..." They worry the unique and individual ways they've found to adapt and cope are wrong or bad, even though everyone grieves differently. Some children like to talk about the person who died, while others prefer to draw, write, or listen to music. These differences arise even within families. One child may want to keep pictures of her mom up on the walls, but her brother finds it too painful to see his



mom's face every day. For many of us, we grew up believing that crying was the only acceptable way to grieve. We never learned that some people never cry and the spectrum of grief reactions is vast and diverse. Laughing, exercising, playing the guitar, and building a deck, are all examples of ways people find comfort. Families who are grieving face many hard questions after the death: What do we do with the person's clothing? How do we handle the first anniversary of the death? What will the holidays be like? While it's helpful for people to hear how others have dealt with similar situations, whatever they decide to do is OK because it's what works for them. Much of our work is focused on normalizing these experiences for people and offering reassurance that they are the best experts on what does and doesn't work in their grief.

MYTH #3: GRIEF FOLLOWS A TIMELINE (AKA: SHOULDN'T YOU BE OVER IT BY NOW?)

For many people who are new to grief, the most pressing question is, "When am I going to be over this?" People are anxious to know when they will feel better and they are likely sensing a push from friends and family to get back to being who they were before the death. As one woman said, "I was impatient with my friend who was grieving the death of her brother. I missed my friend, the person she used to be, and I wanted her back."

This pressure, regardless of where it originates, can lead people who are grieving to feel like they haven't grieved the right way if they still cry about the person one, five, or even 20 years after the death. Many of our volunteers experience a huge sense of relief when they learn in training that grief never ends, it just changes over time. It's freeing to know that it's normal and OK to still want to talk about and remember the person who died. This is part of the reason why groups at Dougy Center are ongoing, enabling families to attend for as long as they find it helpful. Grief isn't something we need to get over in a designated time period. It's something that continues to evolve as we integrate both the loss itself and what it means for us throughout our lives. At Dougy Center, we work to ensure that people feel safe to share that they still think about and miss the person who died, no matter how many years it's been since the death.

It's important to note that insisting on the opposite of these myths can be equally problematic. Given that grief is unique for everyone, one of the most helpful things we can do for ourselves and others is be open and curious, rather than insistent or predictive. Instead of telling people how they must feel, we can remember to ask, "What is this like for you?"



**The National Grief Center
for Children & Families**

Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

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About Dougy Center

Founded in 1982, Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. Dougy Center provides support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

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