

Suggestions for Someone Who is Grieving

Your Fur Baby has left your life and you will never be the same.

What has happened to you may be the most heart-wrenching experience you have ever known. Perhaps you have lost what you thought you could not possibly live without. Perhaps something has been taken from you that has given your life deep meaning and great joy. Perhaps you have been given news that threatens to be your undoing.

You may find that each day has become an agony for you, that you cannot escape your anguish. You may know what it's like to finally fall asleep, only to discover that your torture does not leave you; it follows you in your dreams. When you awaken, it stabs at you once more. You may wonder how long you'll be able to go on living like this. You may wonder if it will ever get better, or if there will be anything to hope for or live for again.

It's possible that what has happened to you may *not* be the worst thing you've ever known. You may be able to recall times in your life when your situation seemed more trying than it does now. And yet, you may still find that the experience with which you're now confronted leaves you shaken and unnerved. Your feelings may rush over you unpredictably, beyond your control. You may hurt deep inside. You may wonder how long your life will go on this way.

However long this troubling time lasts, chances are it will seem too long.

Almost always it goes on too long for people around you, especially those who do not understand how much your life has been affected. They may want you to return to normal more quickly than you're able. They may not realize that your "old normal" may not be your "new normal." They may act concerned if your sadness persists. They may resist your needing to talk about what has happened to you, and what is happening within you. Worst of all, they may not understand at all, telling you "it was only a pet".

Your grieving may go on longer than *you* want it to. You may tire of feeling always tired. You may grow weary of your weariness. You may feel weakened by the continuing pain.

Your task, however, is to remain in your pain *long enough* not a day longer than you need to, but not a day less than your loss demands. For however uncomfortable this time is for you, it is serving a purpose. It is helping you heal. And all wounds heal the same way -- from the inside out.

The words that follow were written for people like you and for times like this. Their purpose is to lead you through these days with as much comfort and as much security as is reasonably possible.

If you remember nothing else, remember this: you are not alone. Others have made the journey before that you are making now, and they have returned to lead lives that are both engaging and fulfilling. Others are making a similar journey at this moment and they are learning as you are learning. Others are around you who wish to support you and to do what they can for you. There are companions for you along the way. You may not have experienced that yet, but they're there.

Not all the thoughts written here will be equally appropriate for you. Some will fit your situation better than others. Take the ideas and suggestions that suit you the best and offer you the most. Then leave the rest for other people, or for another time in your life.

May you find here a sense of hope and the assurance that all is not lost. Yes, you have been hurt. Yes, your path is not easy. Yes, the way seems long. But, no, you do not have to suffer forever. No, you do not have to be completely overcome. No, you do not have to travel entirely alone.

You can do what you fear you cannot. You can find ways to help yourself and ways to be helped. You can make this a time of growth, and you can become the person you wish to become.

In other words, you can heal. You can be whole again. You can be you.

The best way to handle your feelings is not to "handle" them but to feel them.

You may receive unhelpful messages from others about how to deal with your feelings as you go through this chaotic time of your life. You may receive such messages even from yourself. Here are three examples:

- *"You must be strong now."* Sometimes you're expected to be strong for your own sake, and sometimes it's for other people, usually those in your own family. "Be strong," of course, has another translation: "Don't show that you're weak by putting your emotions on open display."
- *"You're handling this very well."* The translation here is, "You're not crying and acting upset in front of others." It's reported that an entire generation took important cues about handling their loss from Jackie Kennedy on national TV in the days following JFK's murder. Her private, reserved way need not be yours.
- *"Stop already, it was only a pet."* Many people know how to respond better to happy faces than sad ones. They have special difficulty when those faces stay sad for a long time. In a subtle way they're saying to people like you, "Hurry up now. Let's get this part over with." They're saying this more for their own comfort than for yours.

If you hear these or similar messages, you will do yourself a favor to ignore them. The best way to go through this process of dealing with loss is by following your own timetable and with your feelings firmly in place. The healthiest way to deal with your emotions is to feel them as they happen, whenever that is, wherever that occurs.

You may experience feelings you'd expect. You may be sad about what has happened and what it means for your life. You may feel depressed, even despairing. You may find that you're more afraid than normal. You may feel lonely. You may be even more lonely when you're with other people, including people you love. You may feel tired all the time. You may be easily distracted.

There are other feelings you may not expect to have. You may be angry, if not enraged. You may be unusually anxious and not understand why. You may feel a real sense of relief, as if a burden has been lifted from you. Afterward you may feel embarrassed that you felt so relieved. You may feel guilty, unexpectedly so.

Another sensation you may experience is this: almost no feeling at all. You may feel empty and numb. That's a common reaction at first. It's a sign that your body may be protecting you for awhile, until you are more ready to process all that has occurred.

What you are going through is an ordeal. It takes courage to face all you must face. It takes a huge amount of energy, and at a time when your energy reserves are in short supply. It takes determination to keep doing day after day what is yours to do these days: to feel all that you feel.

You cannot escape your emotions. Your choice is simply this: you can experience your feelings and move through them as they surface, or you can put them off until another time. But you do not have the choice of putting them off forever. Somehow, sometime, your feelings will demand your attention. By then they may be even stronger and deeper than now.

Remember: the best way out is always through. The best way to get beyond your feelings is to experience them as fully as you can and as often as you need to.

Only by giving your loss expression will you begin to heal.

It's one thing to feel what you feel. It's another to make your feelings known. Yet the more you can do that, the faster you'll be able to heal, and the more completely.

Everyone approaches this matter of expression in their own unique way, so you'll have to figure out what's right for you. Some people find that talking with just one other person works best. That might be a friend, a family member, or a professional of some sort. Others prefer to talk one-on-one with various people. They have enough to say, and enough different ways to say it, that it feels appropriate to communicate with several.

Do what suits you. You might talk with a person you've long known, or with someone you've recently met. You might chat informally over lunch, or at home, or someplace quiet. Or you might talk more formally by meeting at a certain place for a series of conversations, focused entirely on your particular issues. You might have the option of joining a support group composed of people going through what you're going through. These groups can be very helpful.

Make sure you can trust whomever it is you're opening up to. What you have to say is personal enough that it needs to stay between the two of you or within the group of you. Find someone who is a good listener, someone who will give you the space to say what you need to say.

Of course, you don't need to limit your expression to only *speaking* your feelings. Many people report that writing about what's going on inside them is a helpful release. Taking the time to construct your thoughts on paper, or on a computer screen, forces a deliberateness that talking may not provide. If you haven't been a journal writer, consider becoming one now. Write as often as you want, but try to write regularly and always write honestly.

You might write long letters to someone you know who wants to hear from you. Or you might compose letters that you'll never send -- letters to someone who is no longer in your life, or letters to yourself, or letters to God. You might try your hand at poetry or with a fictional story. You might write the true story of what has transpired in your own life.

Sometimes your feelings cannot be contained by words. Who can improve upon crying as a means of expressing sadness or frustration? Did you know that the chemical makeup of your tears of sorrow or grief is quite different from your tears of happiness or relief? There's growing evidence that crying is as healthy for you physically as it is emotionally.

There are other wordless ways for expressing what you feel: drawing and painting, weaving and sewing, photographing and sculpting. Some people find dancing expressive, others prefer singing. Some turn naturally to playing a musical instrument.

However you choose to express yourself, know that you are encouraging your own healing in doing what you do. You are finding ways to make sense of what has happened, and to accept, bit by bit, more and more, the reality of what it all means. So do what's natural for you: express yourself in the ways that are uniquely you. Do it often, and do it the best way: with feeling.

Sometimes it makes perfect sense to act a little crazy.

Yes, these can be nutty times. Your sense of security may be shaken. Old ways of thinking may no longer be valid. Former ways of doing things may no longer be possible. You may feel you have lost your center.

In such circumstances it's normal for you to act differently. You may have a hard time concentrating, and you may be more forgetful than you've ever been. You may find it difficult to make decisions. Or you may make decisions quite quickly, only to change your mind just as fast and just as often. You may not weigh carefully the consequences of what you decide.

Close friends may tell you that you're acting a little strange. They may not tell you that with their words, but you can see it in their eyes. You may see it in your own eyes when you look in the mirror.

German dramatist Gotthold Lessing once wrote, "There are things which must cause you to lose your reason or you have none to lose." If your loss has been severe, and if your pain is intense, you may have cause to lose your reason. You may feel and act not quite normal. That happens naturally when everything around you feels abnormal.

If there are signs this is happening to you, keep the following ideas in mind:

- First of all, try not to panic. You're actually in good company. Lots of people pass through "the crazies," emerging with all their faculties fully intact. Remember that you sometimes need to fall apart before you can come back together in a healthier way.
- Select one person whom you trust for their honesty and their maturity, and ask them to be your gauge. If you want feedback about how you're responding, or if you want assistance with your decision-making, turn to that person. Don't attempt to follow everyone's advice -- it won't work.
- Talk things out. Speak whatever is on your mind. You may find that some of your thoughts *are* irrational, but you won't know that until you've heard yourself saying them out loud. Sometimes it's only after you've spoken opposing ideas that you know both thoughts cannot be true at the same time.
- Keep a journal about what's going on inside. Then go back in a few weeks or a few months and see how your thinking is changing. Notice the ways you're growing.
- Take yourself lightly at times. While your life may feel justifiably heavy these days, it's still possible you may begin to see the humor in some of the things you've said and done. Smile at yourself, and be forgiving. Remember your stories so you can retell them one day as a way of helping others.