

# Grief, Loss, Trauma, Addiction and Recovery

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Grief is a normal, natural, and healthy response to loss. Everyone will experience loss throughout the course of their life; grief is our human response to it. Grief is recognition that we have lost something or someone meaningful and important to us.

Loss is inherently a disconnection; therefore recovery from loss must include the opposite – connection. In the aftermath of loss, most people find comfort and inspiration through their relationships, communities, or spiritual connections.

## Trauma, Loss, and Complicated Grief

Loss is not always traumatic – though it certainly can be. Loss is traumatic when it overwhelms our capacity to function, process, and integrate the experience. When death occurs suddenly through violence, suicide, or overdose it is more likely to be experienced as a traumatic loss. Often times, traumatic losses result in what we call complicated grief – which is a persistent grieving process including maladaptive thoughts, dysfunctional behaviors, and the inability to regulate emotions related to the loss. Due to the disorienting nature of addiction, it is common for substance users to struggle with complicated grief.

Traumatic losses also have the potential to develop into Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms including flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive images, hyperarousal, reactivity, difficulty concentrating/sleeping, dissociation, avoidance, and persistent negative beliefs or emotions. At the same time, loss is at the heart of all traumatic experiences – a loss of self, loss of people, loss of hope, loss of safety, loss of trust, etc.

## Ambiguous Loss

Another type of loss, ambiguous loss, describes the experience of losing a person while they are still alive. Common types of ambiguous loss include the loss resulting from a loved one developing dementia, mental illness, or an addiction (the individual is still physically present, but psychologically/emotionally different). Ambiguous loss also results from a loved-one no longer being physically present such as in the case of a military deployment, immigration, kidnapping, or separation. Ambiguous loss often results in much of the same emotions as a regular loss.

## Stages of Grief

Kübler-Ross's stages of grief (1969) are the most popular way of thinking about the process of moving through grief. These stages include Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. While many have found this model as helpful and validating, others have criticized it – arguing especially that the stages are not linear and do not always follow that order.

## Guidelines for Resiliency in Loss

Another way of thinking about stages of working through grief/loss comes from Pauline Boss' model. She developed a strengths-based way of conceptualizing necessary tasks for integrating and growing after loss.

- **Finding Meaning** - using cultural or spiritual/religious beliefs, rituals, or ceremonies to find meaning, spirituality, community advocacy work, “Loss is another part of life” “I trust that my loved-one is in a ‘better’ place or no longer hurting” “There is a larger plan here” “I can help others”
- **Tempering Mastery** - not blaming self, not trying to fix everything, letting go of control, feeling empowered, clarity about what is and is not within my control/power “I can’t control everything/everyone around me, but I can control myself and my actions” “I have boundaries” “This is not my fault – I don’t have control over others actions”
- **Reconstructing Identity**- Individuals are forced to take on new roles, family roles change, family dynamics shift “Who am I without this person?” “This loss has helped me develop new roles in my life” “I am a survivor” “I am resilient”
- **Normalizing Ambivalence**- grief is messy, awareness of ambivalence, having conflicting feelings is normal “I feel upset AND relieved at the same time” “I understand that mixed feelings are normal and okay” “It is okay to be ‘up and down’ emotionally”
- **Revising Attachment**- support groups, new relationships, stronger relationships, community, not isolating or trying to deal with this alone “I am supported/loved by many people” “I am not alone – other people understand too” “I can make new connections” “I am part of a community”
- **Discovering Hope**- tolerance for ambiguity, gaining inspiration from other’s stories of coping/transformation, inspiration from spirituality, “I can adapt/change and have a future” “I believe that things will be okay”

### *For further resources:*

- Pauline Boss’s (2005) book “Loss, Trauma, and Resilience”
- “Life After Loss” Grief classes in Rosemont facilitated by Fran Gerstein, LCSW
- “At a Loss” grief groups in Malvern for parents who’ve lost children to substance use
  - facilitated by Nancy Buckwalter, LCSW
- Grief Recovery After a Substance Passing (GRASP) support groups - <http://grasphelp.org/>
- Grief Share - Calvary Chapel of Delaware County, Chadds Ford, PA 19317  
Thursday, 7:00 pm, FREE | Email: [info@ccdelco.com](mailto:info@ccdelco.com)
- Ryan’s Hope Program - 336 King of Prussia Rd, Radnor, PA 19087 | [kim@petersplaceonline.com](http://kim@petersplaceonline.com) - 8 Weeks – fall & spring sessions