Some of the first things that grievers ask once the symptoms of grief begin interfering with their normal life, is “What is happening to me?” and “When will I feel normal again?” Many have reported finding themselves lost in a new and difficult world, like being isolated on a strange island with no bridge back to their old shores of understanding.

While the experience for each of us is unique, there are some basic things that all grievers will have in common. Counselors have found a simple way to talk about the grief process so that grievers can locate their place along a map of an ongoing journey. It also helps to see that what grievers go through is normal, no matter how bizarre it feels. People may feel like they’re crazy, but they are not; they are being. In other words, just because you feel crazy does not mean you are crazy. But it’s absolutely normal for what they’ve been through."

The grief process can be outlined into three major “tasks” that each person goes through in his or her own unique way. None of these stages are experienced in isolation. We may experience a little of each one simultaneously, even as one predominates.

1. Avoidance – This period is when the loss doesn’t seem real. It’s hard to believe or even take in. It can be illusionary, but it’s also absolutely necessary.
2. Confrontation – Being with the painful feelings and learning to adapt and cope with them.

During the initial stage of Avoidance (sometimes called “postponement” or “denial”), the reality is too harsh for us to bear. If we were to take in the magnitude of this loss all at once, the necessary life changes and all that implies, we would surely drown. To save ourselves, our mind avoids reminders that the unthinkable has actually happened. We go along like life hasn’t changed. Some of us keep material things just as they were, not fully willing to believe that our loved one will never return to their role in life.

We don’t consciously choose to avoid the loss, despite what others may believe. We have natural defenses that buffer against overwhelming pain, a type of built-in “Novocain” that is released into our system to help soften the blow. This helps us get through the funeral, the paperwork, and the first steps in a world changed by loss. It keeps us safe from strong emotional reactions, but just like anesthesia, there is something “unreal” about how we feel, too. It carries us from task to task like a

“People may feel like they’re crazy, but they are not; they are being.”

“I think the person who has had more experience of hardships can stand more firmly in the face of problems than the person who has never experienced suffering. From this angle then, some suffering can be a good lesson for life.”

- His Holiness the Dalai Lama
programmed robot. Even though it convinces us we're doing fine, part of us knows that something is not right. And just like anesthesia, it begins to wear off. Often after a month or more the pain begins to break through and life without our loved one begins to look all too real. Grievers often report not remembering what happened during the Avoidance stage, just as when we wake from anesthesia. A few months is typical, but it is normal to stay in the Avoidance stage for a year or more.

We move toward the second stage of Confrontation when the reality of the loss starts sinking in. The persistent absence of their physical presence and the lack of their companionship eventually cannot be ignored. This period is marked by the pain of adjustment, mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually. The emotions that surface can range from apathy and anger, to despair, regret and hopelessness. This is the time when we need and seek support. We begin to face our vulnerability. Grievers in this stage find comfort in seeing how others have survived this and we learn to treat ourselves with care. As we tend to our wounded spirit, we might look into our souls and find traces of new growth. By facing the painful feelings of letting go, we also begin to develop a different relationship with the deceased. We find ways to embrace all that our loved one was to us in a new way.

In the Accommodation stage, grievers begin to find ways to fill some roles that their loved one had in the relationship, and will sometimes develop qualities in themselves that help meet the needs their loved one met. It marks the point where grievers become ready to move on with life without feeling they are betraying their loved one. For spouses, this is also the time when people are able to find a new intimate relationship. We can begin to imagine what life without our loved one will be like, and we begin to define ourselves differently.

Grieving the loss of a loved one is one of the hardest things you'll ever do. Each person goes through the process in his/her own way, at his/her own pace. When asked, "How long will this take?" the only adequate answer is: "It takes as long as it takes." One way to measure where you are in the grief process is to observe how you deal with your memories. At first, memories are painful. As the process continues, they are not just painful, but also good. Bittersweet. Eventually memories will become more sweet than painful. By observing ourselves, we begin to understand that a loss is not something we "get over" but rather something we "go through".

Story by Katherine Caldwell

Job Loss for the Caregiver - by Katherine Caldwell, Fran Barrett & George LeRoy

"The hardest thing is finding something to do with my time."
"I feel useless now."
"I don't even have anyone to cook for,"

These are some of the reports we hear from folks who have spent months or even years caring for their loved one during a long illness before their death. To be a caregiver, we set aside so many of our own pursuits to keep our loved one safe and comfortable. We were at their bedside giving medications, we calmly drove them to appointments, we served them healthy meals and soothed them through painful disease symptoms. We helped them to remember, and we let it be OK when their memory failed.

Grievers who have been caregivers at the end of life often talk about suffering a double loss. Witnessing the slow diminishment of their loved one's faculties is a loss felt a little more each week, and then there is the final loss when they die. But there is a third loss for caregivers that we sometimes don't acknowledge. The caregiver's job is gone. For some, the caregiving has meant full time work, and when the job goes, so does their sense of purpose.

Friends may tell us we are free to do whatever we want now. They may tell us we were lucky to have had the time to prepare and say goodbye. They may remind us what a blessing it is that our loved one is no longer suffering. But that's not always how we feel. For the grieve it is not the simplest thing to rediscover your own interests. There seems to be lots of time and no ambition to fill it. And did we actually have time to prepare before the death? Not so much. We were being present with our loved one's needs, focusing on ways to help them. Though we feel a sense of relief that they are no longer suffering, sometimes the final weeks or months before the death are remembered as the most precious time we had with them. Trivial issues were removed from our expression of love, and our intimate work with them might have given us a glimpse of the purity of their heart. We may long to return to the kind of closeness we felt at the end of their life.

How do we force ourselves to occupy the emptiness in the life that lies ahead? Perhaps we need to take a moment to remember that we have great care-giving skills. And remember also that we are fragile right now, that we are in need of tender loving care. Spend a little time each day considering how you can turn your caregiving skills toward your own suffering. When you miss making a healthy meal for your loved one, make a healthy one for yourself, to fit your dietary needs. When you would normally check in to see how your loved one is doing, check into how you are doing, and really listen. Remember how you could humor and cheer your loved one, and see if there are ways to keep yourself humored, too. Don't you think your loved one would want to see you being cared for in the same way you cared for them? It is typical for caregivers out of a job to jump immediately into another caregiving role. As good as it feels to be needed, we have to honor our need for self care. The time we spend caring for ourselves does fill some of the voids. By being nurtured over time, we might arise healthier, stronger and ready to pursue a new-found interest. And remember, we can't properly take care of anyone else if we haven't first taken care of ourselves.
Journal Writing

The Hospice Organization and others who work with grievers have found that the practice of journal writing can be extremely helpful. Journaling is not complicated. It involves putting down in a blank book your honest, raw, unedited feelings from day to day. In doing this, you are engaging in a kind of therapy. It’s not written for others to read or judge; it is between you and the page. If you are a person who is reluctant to tell others what’s going on inside you, your journal can be a confidant that helps get your feelings out.

Truly feeling yourself in the grief process is the only way to move through it. It’s not important for you to be a “good writer” or to try to entertain an imaginary reader. The only important thing is to identify the feelings you’ve felt throughout the day, and find the words to describe them to yourself. Write about what brought the feelings on, and how you handled them. Write about memories that came up and where they took you, emotionally. Let the present moment of the day flow out, uncensored.

Give yourself a dedicated time and space to render into words your anger, frustration, resentments and regrets, letting the page relieve you of them. You’ll be amazed what can happen when you see them on the page! Once you’ve released the responsibility of containing their untamed power, you no longer have to worry about carrying them around, possibly harming someone, including yourself.

Journaling can also give perspective on your progress, providing an instrument for comparison. I have kept a journal for years, and when I look back at what I wrote even a few months ago, I’m surprised to see how different I felt then! It helps to see what you have passed through, what emotions are safely behind you, knowing you have shifted to a different place. Its gratifying to find you don’t stay stuck in one place forever even though it sometimes feels that way. The more you release to the page, the more room you make inside yourself for new experiences, for change.

Grief Recovery on Film

Hollywood has depicted some powerful characters taking the grief journey. Here are a few movies worth renting that illustrate the stages of grief through dramatic cinematography.

Sleepless in Seattle, starring Meg Ryan & Tom Hanks. Addresses recovery from spousal loss as well as parental loss, and the eventual reinvestment in new life possibilities.

Iris, with Kate Winslet and Judy Dench. The story of Iris Murdoch’s long-term relationship with John Bayley. The beginning shows how their relationship started, and later portrays how Bayley becomes caregiver to Iris as she suffers from Alzheimer’s in later life.

Gladiator, with Russell Crowe. A Roman general endures the unjust loss of his family and seeks retribution by working as a Gladiator in Rome.
Where Can I Get Bereavement Support?

**Buncombe/Asheville:** For information about available Grief Support services in Buncombe County, please contact MountainCare Grief Support at (828) 251-0126. All services begin with an initial appointment with a counselor.

**Macon/Franklin:** Monthly support meetings for both men and women. Where: Sunset Restaurant in Franklin. *Women's Group:* The Third Wednesday of Every Month. 11:30 am-1:00 pm or 4:00-5:30 pm. *Men's Group:* The Second Monday of Every Month. 11:30 am-1:00 pm. Open to the public. No reservation needed. Call our office at (828) 369-4417 for more information.

**McDowell/Marion:** Grief Share Groups are offered for adults. Where: CarePartners Hospice office: 575 Airport Road in Marion. When: Tuesdays at 1:00 pm or Thursdays at 5:30 pm. This is a biblically based grief program which consists of weekly DVDs in group followed by discussion (participation not required). Any adult is welcome at either time. Call Diane Brooks, Chaplain for more information (828) 652-1318 or (828) 442-9931.

**Transylvania/Brevard:** Growing Through Grief Group: Where: The Chapel at Transylvania Regional Hospital. When: The 2nd and 4th Tuesday of each month at 2:00 pm. Open to any adult in our community who is grieving the death of a loved one. For more information, call Amanda Alexander at (828) 883-5254.

“Anything you do fully is an alone journey” - Natalie Goldberg