FREE GUIDE

5 Steps Through Grief

A gentle framework for the first hard weeks after a loss.

Ask Dr. Penny
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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Steps, not stages

You may have heard that grief comes in neat stages. Real grief is messier than that. These five steps are not a ladder you climb once. They are places you will return to, in any order, as often as you need.

1. **Let it be real.**
2. **Feel what comes.**
3. **Tend to the basics.**
4. **Stay connected.**
5. **Carry them forward.**

Each step has its own page with a few ideas to try. At the back you will find a reflection worksheet, a simple seven-day plan, and space for notes.

Go slowly

Read one step a day, or one a week. There is no prize for finishing quickly.

WHAT IS NORMAL

What grief can look like

Grief touches every part of us. If any of the following sound familiar, you are not doing it wrong. You are grieving.

- **In your body:** tiredness, a heavy chest, headaches, changes in sleep or appetite.
- **In your mind:** trouble focusing, forgetfulness, replaying the last days or conversations.
- **In your heart:** sadness, anger, guilt, relief, longing, or a strange numbness.
- **With other people:** wanting company one day and solitude the next, or feeling impatient with people who seem fine.
- **In your faith or meaning:** questions, doubt, or a new closeness to what you believe.

> *Grief is the price we pay for love.*
>
> Often attributed to Queen Elizabeth II

STEP ONE

Let it be real.

In the early days, part of us often refuses to believe what has happened. That disbelief is protective. Over time, gently letting the loss become real makes room for everything else.

- Use their name, and the real words: "died", "loss", "gone". Softer words are fine too, but avoid hiding from it entirely.
- Take part in a ritual if you can: a service, a visit to the grave, lighting a candle, a private goodbye.
- Tell the story of what happened to someone you trust, as many times as you need to.
- Let some of their things stay where they are for now. There is no deadline for clearing a room.

Try this

Write a short letter that begins "I can hardly believe you are gone, because..." You do not need to show it to anyone.

STEP TWO

Feel what comes.

Feelings in grief can be loud, confusing, and contradictory. They are not good or bad. They are information about how much this mattered.

- **Make room for tears.** Crying is not falling apart. It is one of the ways the body releases what it is holding.
- **Let anger have somewhere to go.** A hard walk, a pillow, a journal page you tear up afterwards.
- **Notice guilt, then question it.** Grief often whispers "if only". Ask yourself whether you would judge a friend this harshly.
- **Allow lighter moments.** Laughing at a memory is not betrayal. It is love, too.

> *What we can name, we can tame.*
>
> A saying many counselors use

STEP THREE

Tend to the basics.

When the heart is overwhelmed, the body still needs looking after. Small, steady care for your body gives you more strength to carry the hard parts.

1. **Eat something every few hours,** even if it is small and simple.
2. **Protect your sleep.** Keep a regular bedtime, and keep screens out of bed when you can.
3. **Move a little each day.** Walking is enough. Ten minutes counts.
4. **Watch the quick fixes.** Alcohol, overworking and endless scrolling can numb the pain and make it last longer.
5. **Keep medical appointments.** Grief is stressful for the body. Let your doctor know what has happened.

Good enough is good enough

On the hardest days, a shower, a glass of water and one real meal is a successful day.

STEP FOUR

Stay connected.

Grief can make us pull away from the very people who could help us carry it. Staying connected does not mean being social all the time. It means not disappearing completely.

- Choose two or three safe people and tell them honestly how you are doing.
- Say yes to one small invitation each week, even if you leave early.
- Look for a grief group, at a hospice, church, or community center. Being with people who understand can be a relief.
- Let your faith community, if you have one, know what you need.
- If your circle is small right now, a counselor can be one of your connections.

> *You are not a burden. You are a person going through something heavy.*

STEP FIVE

Carry them forward.

Healing in grief is not about forgetting or "moving on". Over time, most people find a way to keep a bond with the person they lost while still living their own life.

- **Keep telling their story.** Share memories, photos and the funny things they used to say.
- **Make a small ritual.** Their favorite meal on their birthday, a walk on the anniversary, a candle at the holidays.
- **Carry something of theirs.** A piece of jewelry, a recipe, a saying, a value they lived by.
- **Let them shape what you do next.** Some people volunteer, give, or take up something their loved one cared about.

Try this

Finish the sentence: "Because I knew you, I..." Write as many endings as come to mind.

WORKSHEET

Reflection

Take your time with these. One question a day is plenty.

Which of the five steps feels hardest for me right now? Why?

What is one thing I have done in the past week that helped, even a little?

Who are my safe people? Who could I let in a little more?

What do I want to carry forward from the person I lost?

WORKSHEET

A week of small steps

Pick one small action for each day. Tick it off if you do it, and let it go if you do not.

	One small step	Done?	How I felt after
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

YOUR SPACE

Notes

Thoughts, questions for your counselor, things you want to remember. Nobody needs to see this page but you.

WHEN YOU NEED MORE

You do not have to do this alone.

A guide can help you take the next small step. Sometimes the next step is talking with someone. Consider reaching out to a counselor if:

- Day-to-day life has felt hard to manage for more than a few weeks.
- Sleep, appetite, work or school have changed in ways that worry you.
- You feel numb, hopeless, or cut off from the people around you.
- Someone close to you has said they are worried about you.

If you are in crisis, reach out now

Call or text 988 to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (US), or call 911 if you or someone else is in immediate danger. Outside the US, contact your local emergency number.

About Ask Dr. Penny

Ask Dr. Penny Counseling offers individual, grief, family, and faith-based counseling, in person and by video. Sessions move at your pace, and most first appointments happen within a week.

Book a session at askdrpenny.com

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