

A P A R E N T ' S  
T O  
G U I D E

# Walking through Grief

**axis**

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*We were promised sufferings. They were part of the program. We were even told, ‘Blessed are they that mourn,’ and I accept it. I’ve got nothing that I hadn’t bargained for. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not imagination.*

— C.S. Lewis, [\*A Grief Observed\*](#)

# Unexpected Places

Life can change in an instant. It might start with an unexpected phone call confirming a diagnosis, or an email informing you that you'll be leaving behind everything that's familiar for a new life in an unknown place. In that moment, you know your life will never be the same. And if you've lived much time at all, you know that what comes in the days, months, and weeks after the unexpected is a void. And in that void, we grieve.

Grief is guaranteed in this life. It doesn't matter who we are, where we come from, how much money we have, or what our social status is—none of us is immune. The question is not *if* we will grieve, but when and how. Even for adults, grief can be tremendously difficult and a real challenge to press into in a healthy way. But the realities of grief seem all the more daunting when trying to guide our kids through the complex web of emotions and experiences that grief brings.

In this Guide, we'll look at grief from many angles and answer some of the most common questions about how to parent a child who is grieving, and look at the best practices for walking with your kids through grief well.

## — What is grief?

Grief is one of those things that's really hard to pin down and define with any sort of precision because everyone's grief looks different. It seems like the more you dig into the web that grief creates, the harder it gets to examine. But we have to start somewhere. One of the best definitions comes [from Grief Recovery Method](#):

*Grief is the feeling of reaching out for someone who's always been there, only to discover when I need them one more time, they're no longer there.*

This definition highlights that grief occurs when we lose something. It could be any number of things, both tangible and intangible, that cause us to experience a sense of loss: a loved one, a new place, a job, a relationship, good health. . . . For our kids, it could be the loss of a teacher, friends, a stable social group, a scholarship, a pet, the ability to compete in a sport, a vehicle, their phone, access to video games. . . the list goes on. Losing things can also cause us to feel other types of loss at the same time; for example, one might grieve the loss of a job, which could also lead to the loss of stability and/or routine, creating more grief. The loss of good health, while devastating in and of itself, can also bring with it the loss of freedom and independence.

There's another type of grief that's often difficult to spot but equally important: the grief of what *could* or *should* have been. This form a grief is equally felt and exemplified in this statement:

*Grief is the feeling of reaching out for someone who has never been there for me, only to discover when I need them one more time, they still aren't there for me.*

With kids, this definition hits home a ton of different ways. One of the most prominent, concrete examples of it is the moment a child recognizes that an estranged parent hasn't been there for them. This is especially apparent when kids continually reach out for the missing parent, holding on to hope that maybe, just maybe, mom or dad will reciprocate, but are disappointed every time. As they realize that their parent was never there for them and

never will be, they start to deeply grieve the relationship that should have been and what they missed out on because of that lack.

Social media also exacerbates this type of grief because it bombards them with images and notions of what the “good life” looks like. When they realize that their lives don't match up to what they see or when they feel they're not as pretty as the influencer popping up in their feed, they grieve that their life isn't as glamorous, exciting, adventurous, funny, awesome, and perfect as the filtered pictures might lead them to believe it should be.

It's important to understand that grief is not an emotion; rather, it's a process. Think of it like a box filled with many emotions that needs to be unpacked. If you think that your kid might be going through a grieving process, a great question to ask is, “What's your main emotion right now?” Depending on your child's developmental stage, the response could be anything from a blank stare to a disgruntled shrug. In fact, not knowing what we're feeling when we're grieving is actually a totally normal part of the process.

We tend not to even know where to start because in grief all our emotions are amped up and maxed out. Trying to find just one emotion when we are grieving can feel like trying to pick out the vocal melody of a worship song at church when the guitar, bass, and drums are all set to the highest volume level. You can see the words on the projector and you see that the singer is in fact singing something, but the words are totally washed out by a wall of sound. To hear the melody, we need to get the balance right so the main line can come through.

The [Mood Meter app](#) is a great tool to help kids identify and unpack their emotions. Not only will it teach them the vocabulary of emotions, but it also allows them to write a short sentence describing why they feel that emotion. Then, it gives them pointers on how to healthily move from their current emotion to other emotions on the meter. Over time, they'll be able to see which emotions come up the most often and will learn how to better identify their emotions. Schools in states like [Washington](#) and [Colorado](#) are implementing the Mood Meter as a practical way to encourage kids to identify what they are feeling, and this is a critical skill when walking with our kids through grief.

## — Why are we so bad at dealing with it?

Have you ever noticed how much grief throws things out of balance? Life is going along just fine—wake up, go to work, come home, cook dinner, spend time with the family, put the kids to bed, and hope to get a decent amount of sleep to do it all again the next day—but when grief is thrown into the equation, the entire flow of our day is ruined. We're overcome with anger, shock, frustration, and indignation, all of which are very normal grief reactions, but they're not emotions most of us have to deal with on a regular basis. Why? Because most of us living in the US can afford to fill our lives with a mound of distraction, allowing us to ignore our pain. This ability to distract ourselves has created a distinctly American way of dealing with grief.

*If I can just not think about it long enough*, the logic goes, *maybe it'll just go away*. And since the five stages of grief (more on these below) are hard and painful, why not try to avoid them? Why not hope that we don't have to confront the loss? So when grief comes, we pack our work days full of events, phone calls, meetings, and late nights. We fill our calendars

with coffee dates, hair appointments, soccer practice, and dinner outings. We download the latest apps, photos, videos, games, and social media platforms. We binge the newest Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu shows. Of course, none of these activities are bad in and of themselves, but when we or our kids use them to avoid or distract ourselves from grief, we do ourselves great harm, whether we realize it or not.

To be fair, there are times when [grief avoidance](#) can be helpful. For example, in the days after a death when a person is faced with the logistical nightmare of organizing a funeral, it's normal to be busy with preparations to the point that he/she doesn't have time to address their emotions (that is, until the service is over and the chaos has calmed down). Grief avoidance can also offer a necessary short respite to someone who has been doing the heavy work of digging into their grief. It allows them some time away from the intense emotions before trudging forward once again. Sometimes we just need a funny episode of our favorite show to make us laugh a little bit or an easy, relaxing book that transports us to another world for a time.

Ultimately, though, grief avoidance [doesn't work](#) in the long run because the only way to truly deal with grief is to face it head on, to experience every emotion it brings, no matter how painful. Even if we think we've distracted ourselves long enough or avoided it long enough, we haven't. **Grief doesn't go away on its own.** Eventually, our pain will catch up to us.

## — What happens when we don't deal with it (i.e. why is it impossible to run away from)?

In many ways, we who are living in the 21st century have advantages when it comes to grieving that past generations might not have had. Comparatively speaking, we live in society that is recognizing more and more that mental health is a substantial part of what makes up a person and that neglecting one's mental health can be detrimental in the long term. With this recognition that it's okay to not be okay, we are creating an environment where kids can be more open than before about their struggles, and this helps the grieving process become more fluid and natural.

But that doesn't mean that we have a perfectly healthy relationship with grief. There are still many subcultures that discourage healthy processing for one reason or another, and we're still human, so the temptation to run away from pain will always be there. The problem with doing that, though, is that **we can never outrun it**. Grief is not like a piece of clothing we can put on and take off whenever we want; it's like a tattoo that stays with us our whole lives.

The reason for this is how grief is processed. Anything that causes grief is a stressor, and stressors trigger [specific neurochemical reactions](#) in our brains and bodies, many of which are uncomfortable or frustrating and can cause us to want to try to numb ourselves in an effort to avoid them. But until we allow our bodies to go through the entire process naturally—that is, until we let ourselves be angry, depressed, lonely, sad, frustrated, etc., possibly for long periods of time—our neurochemistry and brains will be out of whack.

Thanks to these realities, no matter where we go, what we do, or how hard we try to cover up the pain, grief [can't be outrun](#) (except perhaps by death, which many who choose suicide or who die from their addictions may have come to realize). Our inability to escape grief isn't

a bad thing—it's actually a grace if we allow it to be—but it means that we have to face it when it comes. In the long run, we are giving ourselves a gift by doing so, the gift of long-term emotional health.

As might be expected, if we don't learn to deal with our grief, a number of issues, both [emotional](#) and [physical](#), can develop. In addition, people who don't fully confront the pain in their grief can get stuck in patterns of anger and irritability that might not always be apparent. They can look totally fine on the outside, but the grief is still playing in the background. One day, they might explode in an outburst of rage and anger or they might start having recurring panic attacks. If you're wondering if you or your kids are dealing with unresolved grief, [this article](#) outlines some common tendencies that those who haven't dealt with their loss often experience.

## — How long does it last?

There isn't a set time period. It's one of those things in life that can last for [days, months, years, or even a lifetime](#), depending on the loss and the person who is grieving. Each person will experience loss in different ways, so grief is a very personal experience that has no guaranteed expiration date and can come in waves over time. It can be seasonal, cyclical, or even both, and it can be triggered unexpectedly by memories, events, scents, activities, images, etc. even *years* after the loss.

As we're helping our kids grieve well, this fact becomes extremely important to remember. It's easy to assume that just because a kid looks like they're happy, self-assured, and confident that they are in fact happy, self-assured, and confident. But we all know how deceiving appearances can be and how much our culture tells us to "put on a good face." Don't be surprised if one day your child is feeling good and looking like they've moved on, then something as simple as a song plays over the radio triggering a memory, and they are sent spiraling back into grief. This is all completely normal, and it's important that you are sensitive and attuned to when your kid might be triggered back into the grief cycle.

## — What is culture teaching my kids about grief?

Whether they know it or not, kids are flooded with images and examples of how culture wants them to grieve. Not all of the examples they see are negative, though. There have been some recent examples of positive grief. Probably the most common thing that our kids will see and hear about is a candlelight vigil, like [this one](#) held in New Zealand after the recent Mosque shooting. These beautiful and powerful services have become the Western world's way to grieve and honor those lost in horrific events, especially mass shootings.

In recent years, we've seen more and more [celebrities opening up](#) about the realities of their lives, especially the grief and loss they face when tragedy does happen. A great example is Instagram star and recent *Dancing with the Stars* contestant [Alexis Ren](#). Her story is one of tremendous loss when her mother quickly died of cancer. In her grief, Alexis turned to anorexia as a way to cope with the pain, but realized that how she was dealing with the loss of her mom was destroying her, so she found better, healthier ways to honor her mom's memory.

Because grief is so painful, we're constantly wondering, "How do I feel better? How can I make this pain subside?" Essentially, what we're asking is, "How can I be happy again?" This is an incredibly powerful question, and if we're unaware that we're asking it, it will lead to incredibly destructive avoidance behaviors to cope.

The reason this question has so much weight in our lives is because our entire culture is built around the concept of what it means to be happy. Marketing campaigns thrive on this question, and companies will do anything and everything to make you and your kids think that buying their product will make you happy. We've all experienced it: If only I could look like her, *then* I'd be happy. If only I could have a dad like that, *then* I'd be happy. If only I could have that car, *then* I'd be happy. If only, if only, if only. And the [advertising works](#), even if we're not aware of it. What has happened is that we've come to believe that we must *always* be happy and that any other emotion other than happiness is something to run away from as quickly as possible. So while we're experiencing grief, pain, and loss, we're being bombarded by images of happier people and products that promise to bring us that much more happiness, reinforcing the belief that our grief is bad.

In our desperation to regain happiness, we turn to whatever will make us feel good—or at least better than we feel now. Shopping, drugs, porn, binge eating, not eating, binge watching, scrolling, alcohol...whatever works. The sad reality is that our kids are some of the most susceptible to falling into bad ways of coping that can lead to lifelong additions and struggles.

What it boils down to is this: Culture tells your kids that they don't need to grieve, that all they need to do is chase whatever it is that makes them happy in the moment. Unfortunately, as appealing as it looks and sounds, that's just not how reality works. No matter what the shows, movies, ads, and images depict, life is full of people who know what it's like the next morning when the grief hits harder than before, forcing them deeper and deeper into addiction and the cycle of destruction.

## — What are some typical responses to grief?

Because grief is such a complex and interconnected web of emotions, experiences, and traumas, a huge spectrum of symptoms can manifest in your kids. Three kids going through the exact same loss—say moving across the country—can show grief symptoms and react three totally different ways. One of your kids might cry over everything while another might exhibit relatively few symptoms, depending on their personalities and ages. That's why it's so important to be familiar with the common symptoms of grief because even subtle symptoms are important to pay attention to and identify.

Take some time to familiarize yourself with [this list](#) of some of the most common symptoms associated with grief. Once you know what to look for, it'll be easier to notice any major changes in behavior, attitude, and/or habits. If you start thinking to yourself, "My kid is just acting a bit unusual..." don't ignore that hunch. Press into it, observe your child's behavior, and ask a few good questions to see how they respond when the possible grief is addressed.

## — Why is it important to teach my kids how to grieve?

All of our kids will deal with grief in different ways. For some, opening up about what is going on inside isn't hard. These kids are naturally emotionally aware and can identify what they're feeling and why. But for many other kids, their natural instinct will be to run from the grief process. Running from grief can take many different forms, but the core is that kids will run to anything to help them forget about the pain in their life. If a child who's grieving loves video games, he/she might tend to get lost for hours in front of the screen; kids who read might drown out the pain by withdrawing to the fictional world of books; and kids who are athletes might double down on their efforts to improve in order to focus on something other than the pain. But as we saw above, this will only lead to negative long-term effects.

Anyone who has ever handed over their car keys to their teenager and gotten in the passenger seat for the first driving lesson knows how important it is to teach them the correct skills to drive well on their own. You start them in an empty parking lot, driving in circles and getting a sense of how the car moves when the wheel is turned. Then you help them get a feel for how hard they need to break and work a bit on parking. All of this practice, though, has to eventually lead to practice out on a real road with signs, stop lights, and other drivers. Soon enough, you're on the highway holding your breath as they learn how to merge, hoping the previous work paid off.

When we don't teach our kids to grieve well, it's like giving them the keys to the car without any practice or training. As with driving, we actually put them in a very harmful situation by not preparing them for the grieving process. We all know how tempting it can be to protect our kids from pain and loss, to grieve on their behalf without making them do the work, and to give them an easy out when loss comes their way because we don't want our kids to hurt. But [it's critically important](#) to teach our kids the skills they need to grieve in a healthy way, which means not trying to shoulder their pain for them.

The time you spend now investing in your kids' grief education not only sets them up for success later in life when loss comes and you aren't there to walk them through every step of the process, but it also gives you the chance to positively disciple your kids in this area. And the truth is, if you aren't teaching your kids how to grieve, then culture will—and as we saw, this won't lead to the flourishing and abundant life God desires each of us to have.

## — What does the Bible say about it?

One of the beautiful things about Scripture is how it speaks to the whole range of human experience. Its pages are filled with stories of both joy and pain, peace and sorrow, fear and anticipation—all right next to each other. In Scripture, we get a painfully honest commentary on the realities of this life, and one lesson is painfully clear: Grief is a reality.

Nearly everything in between the first two chapters of Genesis and the last two chapters of Revelation deals in some way, shape, or form with a people who grieve. In fact, the theme of grief is woven all throughout the Old and New Testaments. It's hard to find a major character in the Scriptures who doesn't at one time or another breakdown to show us a beautiful and heart-wrenching example of what it means to cry to the Lord in loss.



Just a few examples: Adam and Eve are banished from garden of Eden; they lose their son Able to murder ([Gen. 3:23-4:16](#)); Esau loses his birthright ([Gen. 25:29-34](#)); Naomi loses her husband and sons ([Ruth 1:1-5](#)); Hannah grieves and weeps before Lord when she's barren ([1 Sam. 1:1-16](#)); Job loses everything around him, curses the day he was born, and questions why he didn't perish before birth ([Job 3](#)); the mighty king David is humbled to full repentance when he grieves his horrific and abominable sin against Bathsheba ([Psalm 51](#)); and nearly all of the major and minor prophets grieve the failures of Israel, suffer for the prophetic witness, and mourn the destruction of the nation that is coming.

One of the most humbling and striking examples of grief is found in [John 11:35](#). It's the shortest verse in the Bible and simply says: "Jesus wept." The verse is almost haunting. In the context of the passage, Jesus gets news that his friend Lazarus has died. Those of us familiar with the passage know that just a few sentences later ([John 11:38-44](#)), Jesus will bring Lazarus back to life, and he will emerge from the tomb a healed and renewed man. With this knowledge, Jesus crying over the death of Lazarus seems a bit strange, but it shows the compassion, love, and deep grief Jesus feels for those He loves. It shows that God feels such pain over our pain that He mourns with us.

God understands our grief because He has experienced our pain even more fully than we have. Jesus, the incarnate God, has experienced hurt, pain, loss, and separation on levels we can only imagine. Because of this we don't have a stoic, uncaring God, but one who sympathizes with our weaknesses in every way through Christ's suffering ([Hebrews 4:15](#)).

Our grief acts as a signpost, pointing our gaze to something greater. In our grief we are reminded that something is horribly flawed in our world because pain and loss are not how the world is supposed to be. Our grief reminds us that we are utterly unable to fix the problems in the world, but it also can draw our attention to the God who is working to make right all that is wrong around us. That is the Gospel story. And even in grief, the Gospel breaks into our pain and reminds us that God is good and is fixing it. When our kids grieve, it isn't right; it's wrong because the loss they have never should have been. In that loss, remind your kids that the Gospel is big enough to hold their pain and that our God understands what they're going through. As they suffer, they are never alone because God is with them through everything.

## — What does grieving well look like?

There's no exact science to tell us what grieving well looks like for each person, but psychologists have identified [five stages](#) of grief that are universal and cross-cultural, meaning everyone of all backgrounds goes through them. What's important to remember is that there is no set order to these stages, no set amount of time one will spend in them, nor a guarantee that one will ever reach the final stage (acceptance). So, rather than freaking out if a child seems depressed or angry, we can talk to them about what they're feeling and help them figure out what they need (Time? Therapy? Space? Community? To get outside? Love?).

To reach acceptance, one must have the **desire**, [persistence](#), [patience](#), and **time** to work through their feelings. Obviously, if one doesn't have the desire to confront their feelings, they will never move forward, as we've previously discussed. Persistence is so important because, when people are in grief, they are more easily overwhelmed and therefore tend to

want to remove themselves from the stresses of life. Work or responsibilities at home might take a back seat, and they may spend more time in bed, removed from others. In healthy grief there must be time away from the demands of ordinary life, yes, but the person must also be persistent in getting out of bed and taking care of themselves, at least on a basic level. Persistence also means consistently working through grief, both privately and with a professional counselor. We can't go to one session of counseling, have a set back, and conclude that we'll never move past our grief.

Patience is also key. It takes time, and those who grieve well are realistic with themselves about how long the journey can take. Transformation of our hearts and minds takes hard work and time, and this is very important to communicate with our kids who live in an instant culture. For them, everything comes so quickly from all directions that they might feel frustrated when grief recovery takes longer than they think it should. Remember to always encourage them that it is perfectly normal for healing to take a long time and that while the process is arduous and difficult, doing the work to heal from the trauma will have lifelong [benefits](#).

One thing we haven't mentioned yet is **balance**, a central ingredient to mourning well. This means that we can neither deny our grief completely nor live totally emerged in it 24/7. As mentioned earlier, if we live in denial, our grief will eventually build and cause many negative effects down the road, but on the other hand, if we live totally overtaken by our grief and never learn good [coping techniques](#), we will be trapped in a prison, unable to go on with everyday tasks.

If you have a kid who tends to get extremely stuck in grief, but needs to do some homework or go to sports practice, encourage them to use what's called a [containment technique](#) to temporarily detach from their grief so that they can focus. **In containment, you ask the question, "If your grief were an object, what would it be?" Then you encourage your kid to envision the object, then make a mental vault to store it. Make sure that the vault is strong enough to hold all the negative emotion, so they can leave it there until it's time to engage with the pain again.** It might take a couple of tries for them to find the right vault to hold the object, but when they do, there should be a physical sense of relief that comes over them, allowing them to temporarily remove themselves from the grief. This can help bring balance and can encourage long term healthy grief.

As with most things in our Christian walk, **grace** is a central principle in the grieving process. Begin by giving yourselves grace as you grieve. Recognize that what you are going through can take a long time to get through...and there are not shortcuts. Be aware anytime you start using the word "should" in reference to your grief process. If phrases like, "Well, I should be over this by now," or "This really shouldn't be bothering me still; I should just suck it up" start popping into your head, take note of that and remember that **what you "should" do is give yourself grace.**

**Kids who are grieving need to hear this grace spoken over them again and again. Because we humans default into thinking we should be in a better place than we are, we are all in need of having grace spoken over us. Remind your kids that there is no set date for when the grief will magically go away, but that as a family you are committed to grace. Use this both as a teaching moment for how to be gracious toward yourself and to remind your family that the Good News of the Gospel is centered in God's abundant love and grace for us.**

## — How do I teach my kids to do that?

While each situation is different, here are three great steps you can take to help teach your kids how to grieve well.

**1. Demonstrate and [model what it looks like to grieve.](#)** This can be really hard for a lot of parents because we feel like we have to be strong for our kids; we feel like we have to have it all together, and while there is wisdom in providing a calm, stable environment in which grief can happen, that doesn't mean you have to hide the realities of pain in your own life. Demonstrating what grieving well looks like means being willing to be more vulnerable than you might want. It means digging deeply into your own grief, getting help when needed, and letting down the wall that says you have to have it all together to be a good parent.

**2. Ask tough questions and answer their tough questions.** Kids who are grieving will tend to shut down from the pain they're experiencing, but learning how to ask questions that get beyond the typical "How was your day?" can create opportunity for you to encourage them to not run away. This doesn't mean that you're always asking your kids a never-ending flow of difficult questions, but more that you're willing to model what it looks like to ask difficult questions of yourself, like "What caused me to feel this way?" and "How am I really doing today?"

**3. Learn what not to say and get professional Christian help.** One of the hardest parts about being a parent of a grieving child is knowing what to say and [what not to say](#). What we don't want to do is say the wrong thing and make the situation harder for our kids, so here's a quick video on what not to say when your kids are grieving. However, there will be times when you just don't know what to say, or you might feel that your kid is perceiving everything you're saying as an attack. Because so few of us are professional counselors, it's always a good idea to get some extra help from professionals who share your beliefs and can act as a safe, trusted person for your kids to process their grief with. [Here's a list](#) of professional Christian counselors around the country who can help you through any part of the grieving process.

For more great ideas on how to help your kids grieve, check out this [article](#).

## — Recap

- Grief can happen anytime we experience loss.
- Grief is not one emotion, but rather many emotions.
- There is no set order to or timeframe for the grieving process, but there are 5 stages that everyone must go through.
- It can take years to fully work through our grief, but we must be persistent and patient in our process.
- The Bible is full of examples of people who grieved. Our God sees us in our grief, knows the pain, and is with us in all of it.

## — Conclusion

No matter our background, all of us will face the reality of loss, and our kids are no exception.

They will have grief to face and pain to endure, but when they do, we parents get the sacred privilege of meeting our kids where they are, teaching them skills that will carry them through life, and expressing the beauty and love of God for each of His children. It is no small task to journey with our kids through grief, but it's a road we must travel together, knowing there will be ups and downs, highs and lows, and everything in between. Through all of it, we have a God who can carry our grief because He knows our pain. Let's rest in that truth together as we take one step at a time down the path of walking with our kids through grief.

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## — Additional Resources

- [The Grief Recovery Handbook](#) by John W. James and Russell Friedman
- [A Grief Observed](#) by C.S. Lewis
- [The Problem of Pain](#) by C.S. Lewis
- [The Gospel According to Job](#) by Mike Mason
- When God Weeps: Why Our Suffering Matters to the Almighty by Joni Tada
- [The Uninvited Companion: God's Shaping Us in His Love through Life's Adversities](#) by Scott Shaum
- "[After a Loved One Dies—How Children Grieve](#)," David J. Schonfeld, MD and Marcia Quackenbush, MS, MFT, CHES

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