

Meta Information

URL: <https://www.onlinecolleges.me/resources/coping-with-grief/>

Title Tag: College and Grief: A Compassionate Guide to Coping Strategies

Meta Desc: Grieving in college? Our comprehensive guide provides valuable insights, coping tools, and a supportive framework for college students to navigate the emotional challenges of loss.

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College and Grief: A Compassionate Guide to Coping Strategies

Coping with grief in college? This guide is here to provide support. Explore practical advice for coping, emotional healing strategies, where to seek help, and a deeper understanding of the grief process.

There is never an ideal stage of life to experience a loss, but college is a particularly difficult time to navigate grief. You're exploring your passions and branching out on your own, so experiencing a significant loss or death of a loved one during a period that should be punctuated by hope and promise can feel fundamentally destabilizing.

Grief is part of the process of loss, and experiencing it is normal. — just know that it's okay to get help no matter where you are in the process. Grief is unique in that it requires a lot of energy to experience emotions so intensely, and you will need to pace yourself along the way and figure out ways to accommodate your needs and manage your responsibilities.

This guide will give you a sense of what grief can look like, its causes, tips for how to cope, and helpful resources to guide you along the way.

Common Causes of Grief for College Students

Let's begin by looking deeper at the causes of grief that can affect students. While most people associate grief with the death of a loved one, there are many causes. Grief is present any time you are experiencing loss, — which can include death, but also can be a reaction to other unexpected events, as loss exists in many settings and circumstances. Knowing more about the types of situations that can evoke grief is helpful for you and your community.

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Loss of a Loved One

The death of a family member, friend, or close relative can have a profound impact on college students, especially if you are away from home. Whether the death of an elderly relative or the untimely death of someone else in your family, it can be painful to be away when your family is mourning. It is also very challenging to learn about the death of a friend or other meaningful person, such as a coach, teacher, or mentor.

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Loss of a Relationship

A breakup with a romantic partner, the end of a casual "situationship," or the conclusion of a close friendship can be emotionally challenging. These people are often a core part of your primary emotional support system, and their absence can feel like a deep vacuum, as well as filling your mind with uncertainty about what "moving forward" while newly single or without that friend will be like.

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Loss of a Pet

Pets are often an extension of our family, and if you were particularly close to your pet that passes, you will experience. Pets cannot tell humans when they don't feel well, so their deaths are sometimes very sudden, adding an element of shock to their death. This can create a very intense experience of grief — especially if you're away from home and couldn't be with your pet in their last moments.

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An Illness Diagnosis

Coping with personal health issues, an unexpected diagnosis, or dealing with the illness of a loved one often results in experiencing grief. You may feel anxiety or uncertainty about what is going to happen, especially if the prognosis is not clear. If you are navigating your own health issue or diagnosis, you may be balancing your own shock with trying to figure out how you are going to need to accommodate your treatment needs with your other responsibilities.

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Traumatic Event

Trauma, simply put, is a deeply distressing or disturbing experience. This is subjective to the affected person, and if you experience something traumatic, it can cause you to experience grief afterwards among other mental health challenges, which is why it's particularly important to seek help. There are evidence-based practices to help manage post-traumatic symptoms, and professional help can support you through the grief that will emerge in the process.

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Changes in Family Dynamics

We may think that changes in your family, such as parents divorcing, won't affect us as much when we're adults. Ultimately, all family dynamic changes — even more typically joyful ones like

a sibling marrying or moving away, or the births of new family members — can change our sense of stasis and leave us experiencing grief as you navigate your “new normal” while missing the past version of your family.

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Unmet Expectations

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You may have been hoping to earn a coveted position in a student organization, land a great on-campus job, or be selected for a competitive internship; regardless of the nature of the expectation, learning you didn't get the gig (or achieve the goal) can be difficult. Grieving the loss of an imagined future is complex because its promise might still linger, and you may feel the sometimes-crushing disappointment of an unexpected outcome. This is still a form of grief, even though the situation never actualized.

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Understanding the Grief Process

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While grief is a universal part of the human experience, — as loss is a part of love and life, — its signs and symptoms are different for everyone. However, there are some congruent experiences that we can categorize as a way of better understanding what you may go through in your grief process.

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Grief Stages

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Everyone's experience of grief will be different, non-linear, and it will likely vary in intensity over time. The manifestations of grief can take the form of physical, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional reactions.

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Physical Reactions: These might include changes in appetite (either eating more or less), sleep disturbances (either sleeping more or less), and exacerbation of existing physical health problems like high blood pressure or migraines.

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Behavioral Reactions: You may withdraw or experience aggressive behaviors, self-doubt, reckless or self-destructive behaviors (such as alcohol/drug abuse — this guide to substance abuse awareness can help you recognize these behaviors), or hyperactivity (cleaning, shopping, organizing/house projects, or working).

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Cognitive Reactions: Typical cognitive symptoms include an inability to follow a conversation or read and stay focused, impaired self-esteem, magical thinking (such as “I made it happen”), or an idealization of the past or future and the individual/relationship lost.

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Emotional reactions: These tend to encompass what we have historically understood as the “Stages of Grief” reflected in the Kübler-Ross model. They are:

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1. **Denial:** This includes the practice of downplaying the severity of what's happening or being "fine."
2. **Anger:** This could be directed at the situation, a higher power, unfairness, the one who died, or others who are still happy.
3. **Bargaining:** You may attempt to negotiate with the loss, either prospective or current. This might sound like "Just let me make it to my daughter's graduation" in a person with a terminal illness, or "I'd do anything to get him back," from someone grieving the loss of a loved one.
4. **Depression:** This can take the form of experiences of withdrawal, helplessness, hopelessness, despondency, yearning for your loved one, and uncertainty about the future
5. **Acceptance:** This stage has shifted to "Making Meaning" in recent years, which is figuring out how you will take the loss and incorporate it into a broader narrative. You might decide to host a walk for a certain illness, volunteer for a suicide hotline, or take other steps to express the influence of the person you lost on your life and future choices.

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The most important thing to remember about the Kübler-Ross model is that those stages are not definitive, chronological, or separate. They may happen concurrently, last long stretches of time, not occur at all, or any other permutation of expression. You may also experience other emotions during your bereavement process.

Cultural and Individual Differences

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As much as individuals' experiences of grief differ, different cultural, racial, and ethnic groups incorporate more possibilities of expressing grief than others. While grief is a completely universal experience, the relationships that individuals and communities have with spirituality, intergenerational proximity, (both physically and emotionally), intergenerational trauma, and discrimination as a part of lived experience all affect their experiences of grief.

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Prolonged Grief

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Prolonged Grief Disorder is "persistent symptoms of acute grief that last beyond six months of the loss and include yearning or preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased and intense emotional pain," according to the American Psychiatric Association. A recent study found that rates of Prolonged Grief Disorder are the same in college-age students as other adults — about 13.4%. If you are concerned about yourself or a loved one experiencing prolonged grief, reach out to a professional.

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Impact on Mental Health

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Mental health is a part of your physical health, so grief affects both. The emotional, cognitive, physical, and behavioral experiences of grief can affect your functioning, and ability to participate in usual activities, leading to feelings of isolation. You'll need to identify mental health resources

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as a companion to your grieving process, as the experience of grieving will certainly affect your mental health at some point.

Duration of Grief

Grief is neither linear nor an experience that has a finite end point. While you may feel varying intensity over time, you may still experience anniversary malaise or find yourself affected by your loss at unexpected moments. Grief is a process with varying timelines, and individuals may experience it differently. Even two siblings may grieve the same deceased parent differently. There is no right or wrong way or timeline in which to grieve.

Coping with Grief

Among other emotions, you will likely struggle with sadness and feelings of disconnection while coping with grief. It's important to proactively tend to your emotional needs — just as at any other time in your life — to prevent worsening symptoms. The following evidence-based strategies are excellent tools for managing grief.

Seek Support or Professional Help

Whether in the form of a support group, individual psychotherapy, or coaching by a qualified professional, seeking support and emotional help are crucial while navigating grief. These providers have the tools and expertise to walk alongside you through the stages of your journey.

Express Your Emotions

Containing emotion for prolonged periods of time or avoiding emotional expression can have a damaging effect on your health, as emotion needs to leave the body as a part of its lifecycle. Check out this interesting art project on the [composition of tears](#) to see how different chemicals and pheromones are secreted in tears.

Practice Self-Care

“Self-care” has lost meaning with its branding as being centered around “treats,” but true self-care includes actions you do for yourself today that make tomorrow 5% easier. That may include indulging in a quiet evening to relax so you can be refreshed the next day, and it may also be asking for help with your laundry, so it doesn't pile up and become an unmanageable mountain. Look for these small practices that will add up to managing slightly better day to day. [If you're looking for additional ideas for proactive self-care tactics, check out this handbook to a college student's mental health.](#)

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Journaling

In addition to being a helpful tool in private emotional expression, reflection in the form of journaling is a helpful way to look back at your day or week and consider common themes, struggles, and patterns to identify opportunities for growth. Extended eras of journaling also allow you to archive periods of time in more detail than your brain would be able to recall as it collapses memory to free up more space.

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Mindfulness & Meditation

[Evidence-based and research-proven time and again](#), mindfulness and meditation are an excellent way to improve your mental health and reduce stress. Grief, although often experienced as sadness, is still a type of stress on the body; therefore, beginning a mindfulness practice, no matter how small, will have a positive effect on your mental health.

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Make Time for Fun

Even though your life may seem consumed by sadness while you're grieving, it's crucial to look for opportunities for joy. These can be small, like experiencing the feeling of leaves crunching beneath your feet, or big, like a concert or a trip. Look for small, medium, and large sources of fun and joy as things that you can do daily, weekly, and monthly to pepper into your routine.

[This guide to managing stress in college is a solid resource for more ideas specific to college students.](#)

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Where to Find Help When You Need More Support

When you're dealing with grief while you're in college, it can be overwhelming to find support. As an online student, you have access to all the same institutional supports as your on-campus peers, all of which are designed to help with your success and functioning while you're a student. You will likely find virtual resources helpful, particularly because they eliminate some of the most common barriers to accessing services — such as commute time or proximity. Virtual or in-person support groups can also offer a community where you connect with others who are experiencing similar challenges in dealing with grief.

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Grief Support Groups

Your school may offer a grief support group through the counseling center, student union, chaplain/spiritual community, or other organization. These can be great ways to connect with other students, as you offer each other support as you move through your courses and experiences together. You'll find wide communities for grief support online, such as groups hosted by [Grief in Common](#), that connect grieving individuals from a host of experiences and locations.

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Counseling Services (On-Campus, Online, or Private)

Your college likely has a student counseling center, so you can ask your dean or advisor (or research independently) how to get connected if you are experiencing grief. These resources tend to operate on a brief treatment model, meaning you may want to identify community resources for ongoing care. Your school counseling center can support your search for a longer-term therapist, and you can also search [Psychology Today](#) to identify providers licensed in your state who provide telehealth services and specialize in grief and loss.

National Helplines

[SAMSHA \(the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration\)](#) has a national helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357), which can help you identify referrals and hosts a robust catalog of national resources.

If you are in crisis, immediately call [988, the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#), for triage and support. They can offer phone or text support, as well as help you determine the best course of care if you're in need. It is normal to experience dark moments in the wake of a loss, but you should always err on the side of caution and call 988 if you need help.

Looking for more resources? Access this suicide prevention and awareness guide specifically geared toward college students.

Online Communities

Grief can feel so isolating, but fortunately, you are now more able than ever to access community and support resources from home. While open social media forums may be most accessible, you !! still want to use online smarts and be discerning when interacting with people you meet virtually. To that end, communities like [The Dougy Center](#) and [GriefShare](#) offer support groups and online resources hosted by a skilled team with a nonprofit mission of providing grief support.

Friends and Family

Your loved ones will often share your loss, and leaning on one another can be an important way to stay connected when experiencing grief. After a loss, some families will create a unique email address where friends and loved ones can email memories of the departed, which results in an extremely meaningful keepsake.

It's possible your friends at school — whether you're online or in person — won't be familiar with the person you 've lost; however, they can still offer you support, include you in activities, or hold stillness with you together or through virtual hangs.

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Resources for Grieving Students

The moment you begin coping with grief is the last moment you want to be confronted with endless pages of search results. We've looked far and wide for some of the best resources [college students like you can](#) access in vulnerable moments. From online communities to poignant books, begin here when you're not sure where to turn.

"Bearing the Unbearable"

Predicated on the premise that "if you love, you will grieve," ["Bearing the Unbearable"](#) is a book offering short chapters full of accessible advice and stories of grief.

CancerCare

For those who've lost a loved one to cancer, CancerCare offers counseling, online support groups led by professional oncology social workers, and other resources.

Coalition to Support Grieving Students

Geared specifically toward students, Coalition to Support Grieving Students offers assistance for students and information for institutions that are looking to become grief-sensitive schools.

Heal Grief

Dedicated to dismantling the isolation that typically accompanies grief, Heal Grief hosts individual support, support groups, and an app to remain connected while you grieve. Check out their book ["We Get It"](#) for first-person accounts.

Modern Loss

Authentic, raw, and available to you at any stage of the grieving process, Modern Loss is a candid conversation community featuring advice, vetted books, and resources and articles to support you.

Pet Loss Support

Losing a pet on its own or in conjunction with another loss can be completely destabilizing and painful in a unique way. Check out [Pet Loss Support](#) by The Anti-Cruelty Society for online support.

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H4: Too Damn Young¶

An online community, resource library, and online publication dedicated to teens and young adults experiencing grief, [Too Damn Young](#) is honest, compassionate, and explores some of the complexities of life after grief.¶

H4: Cancer Care¶

For those who lost a loved one to cancer, [Cancer Care](#) offers counseling, online support groups led by professional oncology social workers, and other resources.¶

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Surviving Life After a Parent Dies

SLAP'D is an online publication that shares honest and vulnerable experiences of grieving a parent, as well as a collection of resources and opportunities for social media connection with others who share your experience of loss.

The Jed Foundation

A repository for mental health support for young adults, The Jed Foundation offers resources and referral information to bolster you as you continue toward your personal and academic goals.

Too Damn Young

An online community, resource library, and online publication dedicated to teens and young adults experiencing grief, Too Damn Young is honest, compassionate, and explores some of the complexities of life after grief.

Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors

For those who have lost a loved one in the armed services, TAPS offers grief support and other resources that will help you navigate the complexity of this loss.

Interview with a Grief Counselor: Shawn Blue, PsyD

1. What are the unique challenges that college students face when coping with loss or grief?

I think it can be really difficult for college and graduate students to manage grief and loss while in school. One reason is that students find it difficult to find the space and time to grieve. The rigors of academic life often do not provide the flexibility to manage symptoms of grief in a healthy way. In addition, students often lack the knowledge and skills of how to manage grief symptoms without it negatively impacting their studies. Worries that leaning into grief symptoms will lead to poor academic performance can lead students to avoid their symptoms as a way to cope.

2. How can educators and college staff effectively support students who are grieving?

Educators and college staff can begin by being sensitive to students' experience of grief and loss. When approached, educators and college staff can respond with patience, empathy, and understanding. Responding in any other way can be further traumatizing to students as they are grieving. Educators and college staff can also encourage students to utilize campus resources for counseling. Counseling services can support students through their

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experiences of grief and loss and provide interventions for healthy healing.

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3. Are there specific cultural or demographic factors that may influence how college students experience and express grief?

Grief and loss differ culturally, and it is important to be aware of and sensitive to these differences when helping students manage grief and loss. Cultures differ related to expressions of grief, funeral practices, and how grief and loss are communicated. Helping students manage grief and loss requires an ability to respect the individual's cultural practices, but also balancing it with ways to help students grieve in a way that is supportive and healthy.

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4. What resources and counseling services are typically available for college students dealing with grief?

Typically, campus counseling centers offer individual therapy to help students individually manage their grief in ways that are unique to their particular loss. Counseling services can also include grief and loss therapy or support groups that can provide support in a group format. If campus counseling services do not provide grief groups, they are often equipped to provide resources to help students find off-campus resources. For individuals who identify with a religious affiliation, religious institutions often provide resources for support with a spiritual foundation.

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5. How can colleges create a compassionate and understanding environment for students who are grieving?

College campuses can consider providing training to all faculty, staff, and employees about how to respond to students who are grieving a loss and how to respond in a compassionate way. College campuses can partner with counseling services about how to market messaging that will provide support to students and send a message of understanding during a loss. College campuses can reconsider their course policies and integrate protocols for students who are experiencing grief and loss that might include accommodations for assignments and examinations. In addition, college campuses can reconsider class attendance requirements in situations of grief and loss and create absence policies that offer more compassionate support for students.

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6. Are there common misconceptions about grief that you often encounter in your work with college students?

The biggest misconceptions about grief that I often encounter include expectations of how one is supposed to behave while grieving a loss. Basing many of these expectations on a society that does not manage grief well to begin with, students struggle with trying to identify what is appropriate for them. Another issue that I often encounter is boundary setting while grieving. Managing conversations around grief can be difficult, and students often find it difficult to create boundaries of how they actually feel with managing others' needs and

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7. How does the college environment impact the grieving process for students, especially considering the transition and academic pressures?

College students deal with a lot when matriculating through school and are often juggling multiple stressors. The transition and adjustment to school as well as the academic pressure that is inherent in higher education are only two of those stressors that students deal with on a daily basis. If you factor in an additional stressor related to grief and loss, this can often further exacerbate the stress that students feel, and many become vulnerable to the pressure.

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8. How does the intersection of grief and mental health issues affect college students, and what approaches are effective in addressing both?

If students are managing a pre-existing mental health condition and are also managing grief and loss, it can really tax the student's available resources to cope with academic life. It is recommended that students who are managing co-occurring conditions seek out counseling services to provide additional support. Based on the student's particular clinical needs, counseling staff can personalize effective treatment modalities that can help students manage all of their clinical needs.

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9. What advice would you give to friends or roommates of grieving college students on how to offer support?

Friends and roommates should respond to grieving students in a compassionate and understanding way. If friends and roommates are unsure how to support their friend, it is recommended that they seek out consultation with counseling services of the best ways to support someone who is grieving. Friends and roommates can also encourage grieving students to seek out support services.

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10. Are there specific rituals or activities that have proven beneficial for college students in the grieving process?

There are many grieving activities that can be beneficial to students who are experiencing a loss. It is recommended that a grieving student consult with a counselor so that they can find the interventions that are most helpful to their healing. Some interventions will feel more relevant to grieving students than others, and so it's important to find the rituals that are most appropriate to each student. Grief treatment services offer a multitude of different interventions, including those that aid in affect regulation (i.e., journaling, mindfulness, deep breathing), those that include artistic modalities that can tap into the nonverbal experience of grief, as well as plans to support students with boundary setting, managing the holidays, and providing permission to grieve.

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