

Grief and Loss as Alzheimer's Progresses

Feelings of grief

It's normal to feel loss when you care about someone who has Alzheimer's disease. It's also normal to feel guilty, abandoned and angry.

Alzheimer's gradually takes away the person you know and love. As this happens, you will mourn him or her and may experience the different phases of grieving: denial, anger, guilt, sadness and acceptance. The stages of grief don't happen neatly in order. You may move in and out of different stages as time goes on. Some common experiences in the grieving process include:

Denial

- Hoping that the person is not ill
- Expecting the person to get better
- Convincing yourself that the person has not changed
- Attempting to normalize problematic behaviors

Anger

- Being frustrated with the person
- Resenting the demands of caregiving
- Resenting family members who cannot or will not help provide care
- Feeling abandoned

Guilt

- Having unrealistic expectations with thoughts like: "I should have done ..." "I must do everything for him or her" or "I must visit him or her every day"
- Feeling bad because you are still able to enjoy life
- Feeling that you have failed if, for example, you cannot care for the person at home
- Having negative thoughts about the person or wishing that he or she would go away or die
- Regretting things about your relationship before the diagnosis

Sadness

- Feeling overwhelmed by loss
- Crying frequently
- Withdrawing from social activities or needing to connect more frequently with others
- Withholding your emotions or displaying them more openly than usual

Acceptance

- Learning to live in the moment
- Finding personal meaning in caring for someone who is terminally ill
- Understanding how the grieving process affects your life
- Appreciating the personal growth that comes from surviving loss
- Finding your sense of humor
- Asking for and accepting help from others

Ways to cope with grief and loss

- **Face your feelings.**
Think about your feelings — positive and negative. Let yourself be as sad as you want. Accept your feelings of guilt because they are normal. Work through your anger and frustration. These are healthy emotions. Know that it is common to feel conflicting emotions. It is okay to feel love and anger at the same time.
- **Prepare to experience feelings of loss more than once.**
As dementia progresses, it is common to go through feelings of grief and loss again. Accept and acknowledge your feelings. They are a normal part of the grieving process.
- **Claim the grieving process as your own.**
No two people experience grief the same way. Grief hits different people at different times; some people need more time to grieve than others. Your experience will depend on the severity and duration of the person's illness, on your own history of loss and on the nature of your relationship with the person who has Alzheimer's.
- **Talk with someone.**
Talk with someone you trust about your grief, guilt and anger. If you decide to meet with a therapist who specializes in grief counseling, interview several so you can choose one you are comfortable with.
- **Combat feelings of isolation and loneliness.**
Caregivers often give up enjoyable activities and companionship. Make a lunch or movie date with friends. Taking a break may help you relieve the stress of grief and strengthen your support network. Stay involved in activities that you enjoy.
- **Join a support group.**
When you talk with other caregivers, share your emotions. Cry and laugh together. Do not limit conversations to caregiving tips. Alzheimer's Association support groups take place across the country. Find one near you. If you prefer online support, join ALZConnected, our online caregiver community with message boards.

- **Know that some people may not understand your grief.**
Most people think grief happens when someone dies. They may not know that it is possible to grieve deeply for someone who has a progressive cognitive illness.
- **Accept yourself.**
Think about what you expect from yourself. Is it realistic? Learn to accept the things that are beyond your control. Make responsible decisions about the things you can control.
- **Take care of yourself.**
The best thing you can do for the person you are caring for is to stay healthy. This includes taking care of your physical, mental and emotional well-being. Create balance in your life. Do things that bring joy and comfort. Give yourself time to rest. Ask for help when you need it. Accept the help that is offered.

<https://www.alz.org/help-support/caregiving/caregiver-health/grief-loss-as-alzheimers-progresses>