

# Family and Caregiver Education

## BEREAVEMENT

### Coping With Multiple Losses

Grieving multiple losses is unique and complicated; it is more difficult and challenging than sustaining a single loss for many reasons. Understanding the type of losses that constitute multiple losses — and learning to find your own path toward healing — builds resilience and confidence, encouraging you to take your time and accept your own unique grief journey.

#### What does experiencing multiple losses look like?

- Overlapping losses: Sustaining the loss of more than one significant person within a short period of time where there is no time to grieve one loss before the next occurs.
- Death and anticipatory loss: Grieving the loss of a significant person while also continuing to give care to others and/or deal with one's own significant health concerns or diagnosis.
- Death plus secondary losses: Dealing with death and the resulting non-death losses, such as the need to leave a home; loss or change of job, or early retirement due to caregiving role; the loss of social network; an empty nest; health issues; and financial challenges.
- Re-triggering past grief: A new death often re-triggers the grief of past losses. These triggers can magnify the current circumstances and bring up issues we thought were successfully dealt with after the original loss occurred. It can bring back the trauma and loss of a death that has not been fully processed and highlights how we grieve each loss differently. Because our relationships and the resulting grief from multiple losses is unique with many contributing factors, we often have lingering issues that have not been processed that will create more vulnerability as we try to move forward.
- Dealing with different types of death experiences: A person caring for their loved one on a long- term basis faces different challenges from someone who experiences a sudden death event. With multiple losses, a person can experience both long-term and sudden loss events. With long-term illness, such as dementia or other chronic illness, a caregiver frequently experiences anticipatory grief long before the person dies. By contrast, a sudden loss event, such as a heart attack or fatal accident, provides no time to prepare or say goodbye. These deaths are experienced differently and when they occur too close together, it can be difficult to process these losses simultaneously.

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- Delayed grief: Often, grief is not only complicated but also delayed, due to multiple losses occurring so quickly that one has no time to process before the next loss occurs. A person may feel as if they don't know who they are grieving or who to grieve first, because they feel overwhelmed by so much loss. In addition, they may be grieving the loss of who they were with that person in their life: Who am I now? People who are dealing with multiple losses will often say: "I feel like I am living in two different worlds... without my feet planted in either one."

### *Coping with Multiple Losses:*

The duality of grief can be sneaky and unexpected. It is helpful and important to validate our emotions and know that our grief will both pounce unexpectedly (grief bursts) and, conversely, wait for us until we have time and space to process it. Developing a place of safety and structure both within and without allows us to be vulnerable and freely express our pain. When we find a predictable place for ourselves to emotionally land and begin to process, pull apart and differentiate our multiple losses, we start the process of healing and begin to experience an acceptance of our losses.

A person grieving multiple losses will often state: "I don't remember much of anything of that first year. I felt totally numb and just went through the motions." Often, a person does not truly begin to move forward until the second year, when they feel more present in their life and are able to deal with the reality of their specific losses. Grievers dealing with multiple losses need the validation and reassurance that this is normal, understandable and can be typical to this type of complicated grief. Focusing on self-care and making our routines and environments more predictable allow us to feel safe to deal with the deeper layers of the grieving process.

There is truly no right or wrong way to grieve or any magic timetable. Clarity and peace will come in its own time. Giving ourselves permission to acknowledge this alleviates the pressure we may feel from other people's advice and expectations. Trust your instincts and be gentle with yourself.

A surprising, beautiful silver lining to this very difficult and complicated grief journey is that for those who have the courage to do deep, self-reflective grief work, they will discover new reserves of resilience and hope within themselves. As they go through the process of challenging and acknowledging what is truly important to them now — and find the answers to questions like "who was I then, who am I now, and who am I choosing to become?" — they can find new freedoms and a renewed sense of meaning and purpose that honors both their loved one and themselves.

Visit [hov.org/grief-support](https://hov.org/grief-support) for more information.