




Second  
Edition

# teen grief

coping with the loss of a loved one



This booklet and accompanying videos have been developed to help you understand your grief and to let you know that you are not alone. Many teens are sharing the same journey, and help is available right now.

**grief** *Speak*  
hospice of the valley teen grief program

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## Using this resource

This resource has been specifically created for teens and the adults who care about them. It can be used one-on-one or in a group setting. The booklet is divided into three sections. Each section contains a short DVD featuring teens describing their personal experiences with grief. Corresponding written information, suggestions, actions, and coping skills accompany each DVD. Used together at a comfortable pace and timeframe, these DVD's and print materials offer teens a big picture about grief and what to do with it.

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**1** section one *teen grief*

# What is grief?

## Grief *is*

- The pain we feel when someone we love dies
- A normal response to loss
- A natural part of the life cycle
- Very individual—everyone grieves differently; there is no right or wrong way to grieve.
- An emotional roller coaster of highs and lows
- Often stressful
- A process that takes time. We all grieve in different ways and at different rates; there is no set timetable for how long it will last.

## Grief *is not*

- A disorder or disease
- Contagious
- A sign of weakness

## How long does grief last?

Many factors influence grief. How hard and how long you grieve depends on the following factors:

- Your personality
- Your relationship with the person who died
- How the person died—sudden or expected death
- The age of the person who died
- If you witnessed the death
- How you were told about the death
- Your past experience with loss and death
- Your culture
- Your belief systems
- What support is available to you
- Rumors about you or the cause of the death
- Your feelings of guilt and regret

Remember that holidays and special events may continue to trigger your grief at different times in your life.



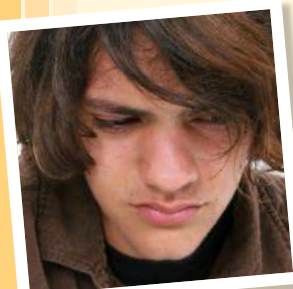
# Where can you find grief?

## Grief is everywhere.

It is all around us because it is a normal and natural part of life. It is how we respond to losses and move forward. The two most universal experiences we share as human beings are birth and death.

# What does grief look like?

Grief takes on different shapes, attitudes and behaviors. Teens experience grief in many different ways and not necessarily in the same order or at the same time.



## Overwhelming sadness

This can feel like an incredible weight that prevents you from wanting to do anything.

## No outward response

At school, you may act like nothing has happened so you don't call attention to yourself. At home, you may try to act like nothing is bothering you so your family won't be sad or worry about you.

## Guilt

You may feel guilt because of something you have said or not said, thought, felt, or wished about the person who died. You may even think that you could have prevented the death. You may also feel guilty for wanting to feel normal again.

## Drop in school grades

Because you are having a hard time focusing, your grades may drop. If they don't go back up within a reasonable amount of time, ask a teacher or a friend for help.



## Loneliness

You can feel very isolated and different from your peers.

## Anger

You may lash out in anger because you feel you have lost control of your life. It is normal to feel angry with the person who has died.

## Lack of interest or motivation

You may adopt a "why bother" attitude.

## Overachievement

You may try to be your very best to make it easier for other family members to cope. This can put even more pressure on you.

## Lack of focus

You may find it difficult to pay attention because your mind can't shut off what has happened. So you become unfocused and unorganized.



## Impatience

You may become impatient or irritated with others—especially if someone complains about something trivial and fixable.

## Drug or alcohol use

You may experiment with either or both as part of that “why bother” attitude to mask or stop the pain you feel. Use of drugs or alcohol makes grief more difficult.

## Inability to relate with peers

Relating to friends can become difficult because their problems may seem very small and fixable compared to your loss.

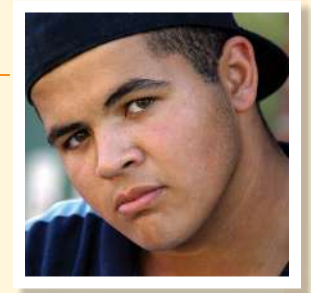


## Worry

You may not be able to stop worrying about your loved ones because of the fear that you might lose them too.

## Sexual activity

You may engage in sexual activity so you can escape the pain and feel connected with someone.



## Withdrawal

You may pull away from friends, drop out of clubs or sports, or cancel plans. Sometimes it's just easier to be alone.

## Unusual happenings

You may experience seeing or hearing the loved one who has died, or have vivid dreams about him/her. Some teens find this comforting since it feels like a connection with their loved one. Others may find it uncomfortable. It can help to talk or write about it.



**How does grief affect you?**

You may not realize it, but grief affects you on **every** level.

## Emotionally

Some common emotions/feelings are:

- Shock
- Numbness
- Anger at the medical or legal system, at the person who died, or whoever/whatever was responsible for the death
- Guilt
- Fear that this will happen again
- Regret
- Sadness
- Loneliness
- Insecurity
- Relief
- Shame that may be felt because of the nature of the death—suicide, AIDS, anorexia or crime

## Mentally

Mental effects may include:

- Inability to concentrate and stay focused
- Inability to make decisions. Don't make major decisions during this time, like joining the military, dropping out of college, or getting rid of something important. Making big decisions may cause you to feel regret and create more adjustment for you. This will make your grief even more difficult.
- Confusion and forgetfulness
- Disorganization
- Dwelling on the death
- Desire to die. You may feel you want to be with your loved one or be out of the pain you are experiencing. Let someone know if you are even thinking along these lines.
- Disbelief or denial that the person is really dead
- Glorifying the person who has died—sometimes we only remember the good qualities or times spent with that person.





## Physically

Physical symptoms of grief include:

- Crying
- Trouble sleeping
- Restlessness or hyperactivity
- Headache
- Stomachache or nausea
- Loss of appetite or increased appetite
- Weight loss or gain
- Lack of energy
- Pain around the heart (This is where the word “heartache” comes from.)

## Socially

Socially, you may experience:

- Feeling left out
- Feeling different
- Withdrawal
- Changes in peer relationships—feeling you no longer have anything in common with your friends. You may even feel angry with your peers because they just don't understand, especially if they complain about their loved ones who are alive.

## Spiritually

Spiritual responses may reflect:

- A loss of faith
- Questioning faith—What do I believe? Where do people really go when they die?
- Anger at your faith system
- A strengthened faith
- A rediscovery of faith or interest in other belief systems, wanting to connect with a church or group to feel a sense of family
- Searching for the meaning of life. What is the meaning of my life without my loved one? What will my contribution be to the world? How will I be remembered?
- An increased sense of connection with the loved one who died
- Questioning why bad things have to happen

How long does grief last?



Gradually, you will learn to adjust to the loss of the person who died and learn to move forward with your life. This not only takes time, but it also takes work. Certain important moments and events in your life will trigger your grief:

- Holidays
- Anniversaries
- Birthdays
- Prom
- Graduation from high school and college
- Marriage
- First child

It is very normal to revisit your grief and remember loved ones who have died. During these moments, it is also natural to wonder:

- What would it be like if they were here?
- How might life be different today?
- Would I be the same person I am today?
- Can they see me now?
- Are they with me?



# Sudden vs. Expected Death

Sudden death is an unexpected loss caused by an accident, homicide, suicide, or illness.

- Shock, disbelief and anger may last longer.
- Sudden death can be more confusing and bring up many feelings to deal with all at once.
- There is no time to say goodbye.
- Sudden death seems unfair, especially if the person is young.
- Recurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks are normal and decrease with time. If these don't decrease, seek some help.

Expected death is an expected loss caused by a medical condition or illness like cancer.

- Small losses are grieved along the way—like not being able to do the same things or go to the same places with a loved one.
- Some teens may start to grieve even before a loved one has died because they are anticipating the loss. This is called anticipatory grief.
- Sometimes there is time to prepare for the death and plan for life without a loved one.
- Sometimes there is time to say goodbye.
- Even though you may be anticipating the death, it can still take you by “surprise.”

It is difficult to lose anyone, but losing a sibling, parent, or friend can be especially traumatic and devastating. Here's why...

A photograph of a man and a young boy sitting on a green couch. The man, wearing a blue t-shirt and jeans, is holding a black video game controller. The boy, wearing a striped shirt, is also holding a black video game controller. Both are looking towards the right side of the frame, presumably at a screen. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**Losing a sibling, parent, or friend**

## Losing a sibling

### *The age factor*

- A child, teen, or young adult is just too young to die.
- It is out of order—a child should not die before a parent.
- You never expect a brother or sister to die.
- It is simply not fair.

### *The cause of death*

- You should know what happened. Family may think you are too young to understand, but being able to talk about this is very important to your moving forward with your life.
- Get the **facts**. Don't listen to rumors.
- Only take in the information you can handle—you may not want to know or handle all the details.
- Know that accidents happen and are not caused on purpose.

### *The guilt trips*

Guilt is a common response to loss. It is very normal to wonder:

- Was it my fault?
- Could I have prevented it?
- It should have been me.
- I didn't mean what I thought or said.
- I should have done more or tried harder.

### *The family unit*

A family is left to figure out how to continue being a family with such an important member gone.

Keep in mind:

- You may feel unsafe or vulnerable—like this could happen again to someone else in your family.
- It is not your responsibility to fill in the missing piece at home.
- Death affects everyone in a family, and each member grieves differently.
- You may think, "It should have been me."
- You may feel regret. "I didn't mean what I thought or said."
- Fighting, tension and stress can increase.

### *The return to school*

You may feel uncomfortable or nervous about returning to school because:

- There are rumors going around about the death and your sibling.
- Students and teachers might treat you differently or avoid you.
- Most people who may do this really just don't know what to say or do.

## Losing a parent

### *The age factor*

- Even though parents are grown ups, they are still too young to die.
- You don't expect a parent to die when you are still young and living at home.
- It is simply not fair.

### *The cause of death*

- You have a right to information about an adult's death, especially a medical cause.
- Get the **facts**. Don't listen to rumors.
- Ask what you need to know. Be cautious about hearing more than you can handle.

### *The guilt trips*

It is very normal to wonder:

- I should have been a better son/daughter.
- I should have spent more time with my parent instead of my friends.

### *The family unit*

- You may not want to burden your surviving parent with your grief.
- You may experience role changes at home and take on more responsibilities.
- You may fight more with your surviving parent.
- Your surviving parent may eventually start to date or remarry.

### *The return to school*

- It may be difficult to hear peers do the normal complaining about their parents.
- The many school references to parents—parent conferences, Open Houses, permission slips—may become painful reminders.
- Not having a parent attend a game or other school event can also be painful.

## Losing a friend

### *The age factor*

- A teen or young adult is just too young to die.
- It is out order. You never expect a friend to die.
- It makes you realize your own mortality.
- It may be your first death.
- It is simply not fair.

### *The cause of death*

- Young people tend to die because of an accident, homicide, or suicide.
- You may have been involved in the accident or incident.
- Rumors circulate rapidly, so get the facts.

### *The guilt trips*

It is very normal to wonder:

- Why did I survive and my friend die?
- I should have told someone my friend needed help—especially with suicide.
- I should have done more, gotten help sooner.

### *The friend's family*

You may feel uncomfortable or helpless around your friend's family because:

- You do not want to remind them of what they have lost, yet you may also be a source of comfort and connection to their loved one.
- You feel guilty that you are alive and your friend is not.
- You cannot say or do anything to make them feel better.
- They may resent or blame you in some way for the death.

### *The return to school*

You may feel uncomfortable or nervous about returning to school because:

- There are rumors going around about your friend and how he/she died.
- You were involved in the accident or incident.
- You don't want to face seeing that empty desk.
- Your peer group may change.
- Students and teachers may act uncomfortable around you.



# Teen vs. Adult Grief

The teen years are times of rapid change and growth. Because you are older and bigger than children, you are often lumped into the adult category. As a result, you can be overlooked in the grief process.

Even though you may look like an adult, there are differences that separate you. The experience of grief can be very different for teens than it is for adults. You may grieve in similar ways, but you and the adults in your life both need to understand that you do not have the same tools—the life experience, support, resources and coping mechanisms—that they have.

## Where is your mind and body?

So you are no longer a child, but not quite an adult. Just where do you fit in? And how many times have you or your parents said to each other, “You just don’t understand!” Well, you are both right. There are physiological (the body) and neurological (the brain) differences going on during the teen years that put you in a category of your own. Check these out.

### Brain

- Grey matter (thinking part of the brain) experiences huge growth spurt
- Frontal cortex (reasoning, planning, judgment, impulse control) not fully developed until age 23–26
- Ability to take in, process, organize and understand information not fully developed
- Ability to judge situations, people and behaviors not developed (Teens may experiment with risky behaviors and make poor decisions not considering the consequences.)
- Less balanced behavior and decision-making
- Rely more on amygdale (portion of the brain that releases gut reactions)

### Body

- Physical growth spurts
- Puberty—changes in hormones
- Sexual development
- More sleep needed

**teen**



**adult**

### Brain

- Grey matter developed
- Frontal cortex fully developed
- Able to take in, process, organize and understand information
- Able to distinguish and judge risky behaviors, people and situations and weigh the consequences of each
- More balanced behavior and decision-making
- Rely more on frontal cortex (portion of the brain responsible for reasoning, judgment and impulse control)

### Body

- Fully grown
- Hormones more balanced
- Sexual development complete
- Not as much sleep needed



# Teens grieve differently than adults

Your behavior may range from cold and withdrawn to clingy, and you may not always be able to clearly express what you need. So use this checklist to let adults know that you:

- Want and need to be included in important decisions
- Don't want to be treated like a child
- Need to work through grief in your own way—not their way
- Need the space and respect that adults get
- Feel pain just like adults
- Don't want to stand out from other peers
- Have limited resources available to you
- Already have a full-time job growing up; grief makes this tough job harder
- Experience and express grief in an on-again/off-again way for a longer period of time than adults. Sometimes you just have to shelve your grief temporarily.



# How adults can help teens

## Remember and show your love

- Share your feelings—talk to a friend or family member who really gets it.
- Join an online grief discussion group.
- Display pictures or create a photo album or memory book.

## Participate in services

- Attend the funeral/memorial service.
- Visit the cemetery.

## Get creative

- Write about it (journal, blog, poem, song story).
- Find a creative outlet—express yourself with dance, drama, music, art, or writing.
- Get physical—play a sport, work out, join a team, ride a bike, or just play.

## Take care of yourself along the way

- Continue “normal” activities by getting back into the routines of school and home—hang out with friends, go to work, attend social events. These familiar routines, will provide a normalcy and structure to your life. Just understand this will not be the life you once knew, but rather a new normal.
- Take a break—allow yourself to take a break from grief and do something you enjoy without feeling guilty. Grief is hard work, and sometimes, you just need to put it on a shelf in order to recharge. Life continues—tests need to be taken, teams need to win the game, chores need to get done—and it is okay to leave grief on the shelf temporarily while you continue everyday life.
- Seek counseling to better understand what is happening to you.

Do whatever it takes to work through your grief. Just don't put it aside for too long. You can deal with it now or later, but you will have to deal with it. The sooner you work through it, the sooner you will be able to get back into your life. You will never forget the loved one who died, but you will learn that it is possible to enjoy life again.



**2** section two *getting through grief*

# How do you get through the first year?

Getting through that first year is tough. This is a whole new experience, and you have all those first hurdles—the funeral or memorial service, first birthday, first holiday, first anniversary and any number of other special events. Here are some common reactions to expect at first and down the road.

## At first

- The death doesn't seem or feel real.
- Your mind and body may go on autopilot. This is your body's way of absorbing and getting through the shock.
- You may feel preoccupied or distracted.
- You may experience a great deal of attention and support in the beginning (food, cards, calls).
- Tears may or may not come easily.

## Down the road

- That unreal feeling may continue to come and go for a long time.
- After a few months, your body starts to wake up, and the pain of grief begins to surface.
- Feeling preoccupied or distracted may last longer.
- Attention and support goes away as people go back to their lives and routines.
- Tears may come more easily as your body wakes up.



# How do you deal with grief?

There is no magic fix, but here are some things you can do that might help you get through this challenging time.

- Participate in the funeral/memorial service.
- Find a creative outlet—express yourself with dance, drama, music, art, or writing.
- Get physical—play a sport, work out, join a team, ride a bike, or just play.
- Share your feelings—talk to a friend or family member who really gets it, write about it (journal, blog, poem, song, story), or join an online grief discussion group.
- Display pictures or create a photo album or memory book.
- Visit the cemetery.
- Continue “normal” activities by getting back into the routines of school and home—hang out with friends, go to work, attend social events. These familiar routines will provide a normalcy and structure to your life, but understand this will not be the life you once knew, but rather a new normal.
- Take a break—allow yourself to take a break from grief and do something you enjoy without feeling guilty. Grief is hard work, and sometimes, you just need to put it on a shelf in order to recharge. Life continues—tests need to be taken, teams need to win the game, chores need to get done—and it is okay to leave grief on the shelf temporarily while you continue everyday life.
- Seek counseling to better understand what is happening to you.

Do whatever it takes to work through your grief. Just don't put it aside for too long. You can deal with it now or later, but you will have to deal with it. The sooner you work through it, the sooner you will be able to get back into your life. You will never forget the loved one that died, but you will learn that it is possible to enjoy life again.

# How do you get through holidays and significant events?

Any holiday is tied to special childhood memories and family traditions. This includes seasonal changes in the weather, smells, sounds and tastes. It doesn't help that these holidays are advertised everywhere you look—at home, school and work. Here are some ideas that may help you get through the pain of the holidays.

## Hold a family meeting

- Make a list of all the things you have always done for the holidays. These should include family traditions such as:
  - › Greeting cards
  - › House and tree decorations
  - › Attending a place of worship
  - › Holiday baking
  - › Holiday outfit
  - › Entertaining/attending parties
  - › Gift exchange
  - › Friend/family visits
  - › Donating/volunteering to a charity
- Ask some questions for each task on the list:
  - › Would the holidays be the holidays without doing this?
  - › Is this something I really like or want to do?
  - › Is it a one-person job, or can it be a group effort?
  - › Who is responsible for getting it done?

- Decide together what is important to you to:
  - › Continue doing
  - › Let go
  - › Do differently

## Do things differently

Try celebrating the holidays in a different way:

- Go to a restaurant.
- Visit relatives and friends.
- Travel to a new place.
- Change decorations.
- Create new traditions.

In the future, you may choose to bring back family traditions.

## Do Things Simply

Try celebrating on a simpler and smaller scale.

## Take Care of Yourself

Pay attention to yourself and your body. Be sure to:

- Build some time into your day to relax.
- Eat healthy nourishing meals.
- Exercise frequently—even just a walk around the block.
- Avoid drinking alcohol. This can intensify depression and disrupt sleep.

## Pay Attention to Your Feelings

Feelings demand expression. When we acknowledge them and let them out, they go away. Suppressed feelings that go unexpressed get worse. Be sure to:

- Express yourself.
- Ask for what you need.
- Be patient with yourself.
- Cry when you need to. It relieves the heaviness.

## Expect to Feel Some Pain

Expect moments of sadness and pain throughout the season. Identify what holiday activities trigger your grief (a song, decorations, tradition). Plan ways to get your pain from the inside to the outside, and express it through music, art, writing, athletics, or a memory book.

## Seek Support from Others

You should not grieve alone. Share your experience with someone who understands your loss. That person may not be in your usual circle of family or friends. You can also join a grief support group. It may be helpful to be around others who have experienced a loss and are grieving.

## Give to Others

One of the most healing things you can do for yourself is to be with other people during the holidays. Caring for and giving to others is a way to honor your loved one and may help you feel better.



# How do you get through the rest of your life?

Special moments and events in your life can trigger your grief. And as a result, it's very normal to revisit those feelings and miss the person who died. It's also okay to ask for help even though time has gone by and you or others may think you should be over it by now. You will miss having your loved one at your birthday, graduation, or wedding and think of them on their special days, but there are ways to prepare yourself for these moments and still include the one who died.

## Important moments

Anniversaries	Games	Graduation
Birthdays	Recitals	Marriage
Holidays	Prom	First child

During these important moments, it is natural to wonder about your loved one:

- What would life be like if you were still here?
- How would my life be different today?
- Would I be the same person I am today?
- Can you see me now?
- Are you with me?



# What grief reminders can you expect along the way?

Be as ready as possible for these moments. Know that it is okay to remember those you love. Even though they are not present in a physical form, they are a part of who you are and will always be with you. Here are some ways to remember and keep your loved ones with you and plan ahead.

- Talk about your loved ones with others to keep their memory alive.
- Display pictures of them or a photo album/memory book.
- Maintain family traditions.
- Play their favorite music.
- Eat or prepare their favorite foods.
- Set a place at the table for them.
- Light a candle.
- Talk to them.
- Visit the cemetery.
- Write about them—journal, poem, song, story.
- Plant a tree.
- Create a ceremony.
- Take a walk in nature.
- Dedicate a donation to a charitable cause in their memory/name.

Be sure to check out resources available at the end of **Section 3**.



**3** **section** *getting through secondary losses:*  
**three** *since you've been gone*

# What are secondary losses?

Having a loved one die is the biggest loss imaginable. The loss not only affects you on every level, but it can also change other areas of your life. These changes can occur at school, home and work. They can also affect your level of responsibility. These changes are called secondary losses because they too can cause grief.





# Where can you find secondary losses?

## Changes at home

- An increase in responsibility for other family members
- An increase in tension and anger
- Sadness
- Constant worry
- Financial pressure
- Putting your plans on hold
- Over-protectiveness by a parent
- A parent dating or remarrying
- Family members grieving in their own way and it may not be your way

## Changes at school or work

- Friendships may go away or change.
- Peer groups may change.
- People may avoid you because they don't know what to say or do.
- You may break up with a boyfriend or girlfriend.
- You may have to move geographically and change schools or jobs.
- You may have to get a job.
- Your school work or job performance may suffer.



Living with grief is challenging. It's very normal to feel that you are living in two worlds—the outside life of normalcy with your friends and school, and the inside life of grief at home. The most important thing you can do for yourself during this difficult time is **to speak up**. You may think that sharing your thoughts and feelings will add more pressure or stress, but you are actually helping everyone and yourself in the long run. Your speaking up will give others the opportunity to share their feelings and relieve some of the pressure and stress that has been building.



# How do you deal with secondary losses?

Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Let your needs be known.
- Don't worry about burdening others.
- You need to speak up in order to feel better.
- Protecting others from grief is not your responsibility.
- Give others the opportunity to express themselves.
- Be patient and gentle with yourself as you face this new territory—at home, work, in school, with relationships.
- Understand and accept that everyone grieves differently.
- Be open to communication.
- Ask for help when you need it as your role in the family changes.
- Be open to outside help.
- Find someone at school or work that you trust.
- Maintain your routines with meals, exercise, school and your social life.
- Dose it.—Grief can be overwhelming to deal with all at one time, so break it into smaller workable pieces or chunks. It's okay to take a break and do the things you did before. For example, go to the movies with friends.
- Develop a plan for those moments when you are overwhelmed—a safe place to go or a safe person to talk to.
- Write down the changes you are experiencing to help make sense of your thoughts and feelings.

Know that it is okay to remember those you love. Even though they are not present in a physical form, they are a part of who you are and will always be with you. This will be a difficult journey, but you will get through it with the help of friends and family and the memories of your loved one.



# What help is available?

You don't have to face grief alone. There is help:

## At home

- Talk to an immediate or extended family member, and let your needs be known.
- Read about it. There are many books written for teens about grief.
- Spend time with things that bring you comfort—your favorite music, a pet, or writing in a journal.

## At school

- Talk to a trusted teacher, coach, nurse, or school counselor.
- Talk to a classmate or friend who really gets it.

## At Hospice of the Valley

- Call us at 602.530.6900.
- Go online to [hov.org](http://hov.org).
- Review the Hospice of the Valley list of reading materials.
- Ask about New Song Center (for grieving families).
- Check out community services available to teens.

## In your community

- Talk to your doctor or nurse.
- Ask your place of worship for help.
- Check your school for resources and help.

Your teen years are a time of forming your identity, experimenting with roles and entering the adult world.

Grief can really complicate this already complex journey, but this can also be a time of maturity, growth, strength and hope.

You will continue becoming who you are while keeping the best of your loved one with you.

**Remember...**

**I've learned**

...I'm not alone.

...there are people who really care about me and want to help me.

...it's okay to cry.

...my life will never be the same, but I can adjust to change.

...to ask for help.

...I'm stronger than I ever knew I could be.

...I'm going to be okay.

**Videos here!**

Click on the following YouTube videos to learn more.

**Section 1 – [Teen Grief](#)**

**Section 2 – [Getting through Grief](#)**

**Section 3 – [Getting through Secondary Losses:  
Since You've Been Gone](#)**



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