

Bereavement and Grief: Information for Military Families and Communities

Mental Health America of Wisconsin offers its gratitude to the brave service men and women who have lost their lives, and we offer our condolences to their families.

The death of a loved one is always difficult. When the death results from a war or a disaster, it can be even more troubling given the sudden and potentially violent nature of the event. After the death of someone you love, you experience bereavement, which literally means, “to be deprived by death.” You may experience a wide range of emotions, including:

Denial	Yearning
Disbelief	Anger
Confusion	Humiliation
Shock	Despair
Sadness	Guilt

These feelings are common reactions to loss. Many people also report physical symptoms of acute grief – stomach pain, loss of appetite, intestinal upsets, sleep disturbances or loss of energy. Of all life’s stresses, mourning can seriously test your natural defense systems. Existing illnesses can worsen or new conditions may develop. Profound emotional reactions can include anxiety attacks, chronic fatigue, depression and thoughts of suicide.

Mourning is the natural process through which a person accepts a major loss. Mourning may include military or religious traditions honoring the dead, or gathering with friends and family to share your loss. Mourning is personal and can last months or years. Grieving is the outward expression of your loss. Your grief is likely to be expressed both physically and psychologically. For example, crying is a physical expression, while depression is a psychological expression.

Be aware that the death may necessitate major life adjustments, such as parenting alone, adjusting to single life or returning to work. These challenges may intensify any anxiety and grief you are already experiencing. Allow yourself to express these feelings.

Living with Grief

When a loved one dies, the best thing you can do is to allow yourself to grieve. There are many ways to cope effectively.

- **Seek out caring people.** Find relatives and friends who understand your feelings. Tell them how you feel; it will help you to work through the grieving process. Join a support group with others who have experienced similar losses. Support groups exist at most

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What You Need to Know...



military installations. If you feel overwhelmed, ask for help. It's not a sign of weakness. Talk with a trusted relative, friend, family services staffer, minister or rabbi. Military chaplains can be helpful, as most receive training in pastoral counseling and crisis. Don't let yourself become isolated.

- **Take care of your health.** See your family physician. Eat properly, exercise and get plenty of rest. Be aware of the danger of using medication or alcohol to deal with your grief.
- **Be patient.** It takes effort and time to absorb a major loss, accept your changed life, and begin to live again in the present and not dwell on the past.
- **Seek help.** If your feelings become too much to bear, seek professional assistance to help work through your grief. It's a sign of strength, not weakness, to seek help.

Helping Others Grieve

If someone you care about has lost a loved one, you can help him or her through the grieving process.

- **Listen.** Encourage the person to talk about his or her feelings and to share memories of the deceased. Remember, it may take the person a long time to recover from the loss.
- **Don't offer false comfort.** It doesn't help the grieving person to say, "It was for the best." or "You'll get over it in time." Instead, offer a simple expression of sorrow and take time to listen.
- **Offer practical help.** Baby-sitting, cooking and running errands are ways to help someone who is grieving.

Encourage professional help when needed. Don't hesitate to recommend professional help when you feel someone is experiencing too much pain to cope alone.

Helping Children Grieve

Children grieve differently from adults. A parent's death can be particularly difficult for small children, affecting their sense of security. Often, they are confused about the changes they see taking place, particularly if well-meaning adults try to protect them from the truth or from their surviving parent's grief. Limited understanding and an inability to express feelings put very young children at a special risk. They may revert to earlier behaviors (such as bed-wetting), ask questions about the deceased that seem insensitive, invent games about dying or pretend that the death never happened.

Coping with a child's grief puts added strain on a bereaved parent. However, angry outbursts or criticism only deepen a child's anxiety and delays recovery. Instead, take extra time and talk honestly with children, in terms they can understand. Help them work through their feelings, and remember that they are looking to you for suitable behavior and coping skills.

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Helping Resources

Contact Mental Health America of Wisconsin at (414) 276-3122 or visit www.mhawisconsin.org for more information.

Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, Inc. assists people who have lost family members in the Armed Forces. TAPS provides a survivor-peer support network, grief counseling referrals, and crisis information and can be reached at 1-800-959-TAPS (8277) or www.taps.org.

The Army Family Assistance Hotline is (800) 833-6622, and the Army Reservist Hotline is (800) 318-5298.

The Coast Guard Reserve web site is www.uscg.mil/hq/reserve/reshmpg.html.

The number for Marine Corps Community Service Centers West of the Mississippi is (800) 253-1624; and, East of the Mississippi, the number is (800) 336-4663.

The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs website contains information on and applications for compensation, health, burial, special programs, and other benefits. Contact www.va.gov.

The following military family service-related web sites include information and networking:

www.lifelines2000.org; www.militarycity.com; www.armytimes.com, www.navytimes.com, www.airforcetimes.com, and www.marinecorpstimes.com); www.afsv.af.mil/FMP; and www.sgtmoms.com.

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