

# coping with grief & loss while working in restaurants

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## What is Grief?

Grief is the cluster of emotions that emerge after experiencing loss or a change in our life, so it's not just one singular feeling, but a complex wave of multiple emotions flooding at one time.

## Processing Grief

In order to move through our grief, we must attend to the myriad of emotions that arise. Acknowledging and exploring our grief becomes a way to honor and remember the loved ones we've lost.

## Hospitality & Grief

People who work in restaurants often put their emotional lives aside to prioritize others' needs, which can make experiencing and understanding our grief especially challenging.

## Coping with Grief

Regardless of where we work or what we do, it's important to intentionally and healthily cope with our grief. While it's ok to sometimes numb our feelings, we must address them eventually.

## Substance Use & Grief

Using substances to numb our emotional lives is common in the restaurant industry, but can be dangerous in excess. The onslaught of emotions during grief makes us especially susceptible to misusing substances, so we must be mindful about our needs and how we tend to them.

*the information provided in this document is for educational purposes only. it is not therapy, nor is it a replacement for therapy. individuals who need additional support are encouraged to enlist the help of a mental health practitioner.*

### some yellow flags that you might need support

- you're regularly drinking to avoid feelings
- you go to work to avoid feelings
- you find yourself stuck in a single emotion
- your grief is negatively impacting your relationships and ability to work & function
- your grief is negatively impact your self-image

### some ways to cope with our grief

- engage with others who are grieving
- utilize therapy & support groups
- spend some time alone taking care of yourself
- express yourself through journaling, art, or projects to remember your loved one
- take emotional rest by reading, listening to a podcast, or working on a project

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## Understanding Grief

Grief is often regarded as the challenging feeling that comes after a loss, but it's actually not just one emotion. Grief is the cluster of emotions that emerge after experiencing loss or a change in our life, so it's not just one singular feeling, but a complex wave of multiple emotions happening at one time.

This wave of emotion can be overwhelming since experiencing so many big emotions at once is tough to sort, understand, and attend to. Our emotions are already complex and continue to grow more complex as we live through out lives, making the experience of grief especially challenging.

The emotions we feel within our grief will vary from experience to experience, but they are often as large and complex as our relationship with who or what we've lost. The more intricate, dynamic, complex, and deep the relationship with that person, the more intricate dynamic, complex, and deep our feelings within out grief will be. In our grief, we can feel a combination of emotions like sadness, despair, anguish, rage, and fear, but also gratitude for the relationship, the joy of our memories together, and the love we have and continue to have for them.

As we grieve, we tend to move through all those emotions; in and out and cycling through them over and over. It can be confusing to move so quickly from one emotion to the next, and it's tough to not have control of what's coming next. Sometimes it feels wrong to experience pleasant emotions like happiness within our grief, but it's important to know that those pleasant emotions *are part of grief itself* and natural to experience them. Finding periods of laughter within our sadness is normal, so it's ok to honor those emotions as they emerge.

Some emotions we feel in our grief are especially challenging to acknowledge, like shame, guilt, regret, and even in some cases, relief. It's important, though, to not judge our feelings within our grief. The emotions we feel are emerging for a reason, and should be acknowledged and eventually attended to when we're ready. Every emotion we feel in our grief is valid, normal, and worth acknowledging, and the emotions we repress, ignore, or judge are the ones we get stuck in.

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## Processing Grief

Processing our grief is essential for our well-being, but is also a wonderful way to honor and remember who or what we've lost. In the early stages of grief, the movement between emotions is quick, overwhelming, and often confusing. But over time, the time between emotional shifts lengthens until they're familiar and a part of your everyday. There are emotional moments that will still flood and surprise you throughout your life: the joy of a memory, the longing when you wish they were with you to experience a moment, the guilt when you realize you don't think of them everyday anymore. These feelings might come on schedule, like holidays and anniversaries, or randomly.

Think of grief like a barrel of whiskey, a bottle of wine, aged cheese or cured meat. They change and evolve over time depending on the location, humidity, temperature, and light, and evolve further once bottled, opened, or moved. Depending on time and circumstance, different flavors, textures, and aromas emerge. Our grief is no different. It will change and evolve over time, and its expression in our lives might surprise us. Sometime we feel at peace with our grief, and other times it feels as fresh as when it first revealed itself. Grief, in this sense, becomes a life-long process - always changing, constantly transforming, and forever evolving. It's important to accept that these feelings of grief become a part of you. Grief doesn't end; it only transforms.

With that, it's important to work and move through the emotions that have come with your grief. Some emotions might be more familiar and manageable; old friends in which you're well acquainted. Others are new or perhaps emotions you've avoided or ignored. When we don't move through our emotions, they linger and demand our attention. We get stuck in our grief when we run from or suppress our emotions, or if we only tend to the emotions we're most comfortable with and deem acceptable.

Experiencing big emotions can be stressful, which builds energy in our bodies. When our emotions become overwhelming, it might be expressed through crying. Crying is an essential release of this energy, and is encouraged. After crying, you might feel emotional exhaustion or "numbness" which is normal and part of the cycle that comes with experiencing those emotional waves.

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## Experiencing Grief When Working in Restaurants

We all have emotions that are with us all the time whether we acknowledge them or not. Working in restaurants requires emotional labor, which is essentially crafting and managing our emotional lives to present ourselves and interact with other people in a certain way while doing a job. Emotional labor while working in restaurants is dictated by both interactions with guests and time demands. Oftentimes, there isn't room or opportunity to feel and explore the depth of our emotions while at work, resulting in pent up and unattended emotions that become unfamiliar to us and challenging to manage or understand.

It's certainly possible to build our emotional intelligence and agility in order to healthily navigate the emotional labor required when working in a restaurant (and many do!), however, much of the workforce in the industry repress their emotional lives. So when we experience the swell of emotions that come with grief, it's especially overwhelming because they're undeniable, massive, and imposing - in other words, they're not as easy to repress. If we are not familiar or practiced with attending to our feelings, this makes processing our emotions especially challenging - like running a marathon without training.

So when we return to work and have to utilize emotional labor while grieving, it can be especially overwhelming. Our big emotions are relentlessly demanding our attention while there is another ticket coming through the printer, another dish to fire, another guest sat, another cocktail to shake, and another party to greet. We observe others celebrating with loved ones, completely and rightfully unaware of the grief that's circling their table.

It doesn't seem fair, right? This feeling of injustice can further complicate our grief. *"How can the world just keep moving while mine is falling to bits?"* This is a common feeling regardless of occupation, but restaurant professionals cannot just go to work and close their office door: the job is to engage.

But regardless of where we work or what we do, we are human beings with full emotional lives who need support and care. No one is superhuman, as much as we wish we were.

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## Coping with Grief

Coping can take quite a few forms. Simply, our coping can be categorized into 2 buckets: when we lean into the grief and when we try to separate ourselves from it. Both ways of coping are helpful and often necessary on our journey with grief. Another way we can look at these coping categories are long term vs short term, or adaptive vs maladaptive. To cope adaptively means to address the emotions we're experiencing in our grief, take time to understand them, and use that understanding to move towards healing. When we cope maladaptively, we essentially press "pause" on what we're experiencing either through retreating, suppressing our emotions, or numbing them. Maladaptive coping can serve us in situations when we're not ready or able to address the depth of what we're experiencing, but it's important to eventually utilize our adaptive coping skills so we can safely process our grief. It's when we only rely on our maladaptive coping - like excessive substance use, working to avoid our feelings, or pretending that we're ok when we're not - that we start running into trouble. Not only are we putting our health in jeopardy, we're creating circumstances where it becomes more and more challenging to continue on with our lives.

## Substance Use & Grief

The restaurant industry has an especially complicated relationship with substances - particularly alcohol. Not only is it an easily accessible and normalized maladaptive coping vehicle, it's also a primary way we connect with each other after and outside of work. In times of grief, it's normal and natural to want to be with the people who make us feel seen, supported, and cared for, and in hospitality, those people are usually our colleagues.

While the use of substances to numb our emotional experiences might seem inconsequential in the short-term, it's important to be mindful of the role substances are playing in your long-term grief journey. While it can be helpful to press pause on our grief, using alcohol and other substances to avoid feeling our grief won't make those feelings go away - they'll only grow stronger. Continuously check in with yourself and those you're close to about the role alcohol is playing in your grief journey, take a break if you need to, and pursue support (like therapy or group counseling) early and often.

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## some yellow flags that we might need support

Grief can be so overwhelming that we lose ourselves in it. These are some examples of when to seek help and further support

01

### you're regularly drinking to avoid your feelings

are you drinking every day or at times you normally wouldn't? take some time to think about the patterns around when, why, and with whom you're drinking. if you're drinking to constantly numb out, that's likely an indication you need additional support.

02

### you go to work to avoid your feelings

since working requires emotional labor and makes it hard to feel our true feelings, going to work to avoid challenging feelings or picking up extra shifts or projects is common and understandable in grief. take note of this, because it's important to give yourself time and space to feel and explore your grief.

03

### you find yourself stuck in a single emotion

our grief is some a complex web of emotions that is constantly evolving, but sometimes we get stuck in one emotion. it might be anger, despair, regret, shame, or a multitude of other feelings, but we need to move through them to healthily cope. if you're stuck, ask for help processing the feeling.

04

### your grief is negatively impacting your relationships and ability to work & function

grief can be overwhelming, but if you find your grief is debilitating and paralyzing for longer than your peers, you might need some additional support. the grief never leaves us, but it's important that we're able to eventually healthily adapt to it.

05

### your grief is negatively impact your self-image

when we're especially connected with who or what we're grieving, it can threaten our sense of self and identity. if you find yourself stuck in patterns of self-loathing, regret, questioning your worth, or capabilities, please reach out for additional support.



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## some ways to cope with our grief without alcohol

coping is a dynamic process, and it's helpful to utilize a multitude of coping strategies to move through our grief. be mindful of getting stuck in only one strategy (i.e. - substance use, exercise, eating, working, etc.) and don't be afraid to experiment and try new things.



01

### when we need to connect

simply being around people we love and care about can be helpful. this can look like talking through our feelings, engaging in an activity like playing a game or watching a movie, or simply sharing space together. support groups or social media groups centered on grief can also help us feel seen and validate our experience.



02

### when we need to withdraw

sometimes we need to be alone to sit with our grief without distraction. activities like exercise or meditation can be helpful, or even taking a long bubble bath or a nap. journaling and creative expression can also help you process your emotions, or immersing yourself in nature can give you perspective.



03

### when we need emotional rest

sometimes we need to numb out. watching a movie alone or with friends, listening to music, a podcast, or audiobook, or engaging in an activity that requires your attention (like crafting) can help balance the work spent processing with emotional rest.



04

### when we need to process

journaling, talking about emotions with loved ones, engaging in therapy or support groups, and making art or other forms of self-expression like scrapbooking are helpful when processing. reading books about grief or joining social media groups can be beneficial as well.



05

### when we need to move forward

when we're ready to embark into the world, it's important to grant ourselves grace and compassion. it takes a lot of experimentation in learning how to re-engage, and might find we moved forward too much too soon. take your time with yourself, and communicate with loved ones and colleagues about your needs and where you are in your grief journey.

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## additional resources

### [Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief](#)

In this groundbreaking new work, David Kessler—an expert on grief and the coauthor with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross of the iconic *On Grief and Grieving*—journeys beyond the classic five stages to discover a sixth stage: meaning.

### [Permission to Feel: Unlocking the Power of Emotions to Help Our Kids, Ourselves, and Our Society Thrive](#)

Marc Brackett is a professor in Yale University's Child Study Center and in his 25 years as an emotion scientist, he has developed a remarkably effective plan to improve the lives of children and adults - a blueprint for understanding our emotions and using them wisely so that they help, rather than hinder, our success and well-being.

### [Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life](#)

Emotional agility us to navigate life's twists and turns with self-acceptance, clear-sightedness, and an open mind. This process isn't about ignoring difficult emotions and thoughts. It's about holding those emotions and thoughts loosely, facing them with courage and compassion, and moving beyond them to ignite change in your life.

### [What's Your Grief Podcast: Grief Support for Those Who Like to Listen](#)

In this podcast series Eleanor Haley and Litsa Williams, the two mental health professionals behind the grief website *What's Your Grief*, seek to leave no stone unturned in demystifying the complicated and sometimes crazy experience of living life after loss.

### [Hope for Bereaved .com](#)

HOPE For Bereaved is dedicated to helping grieving children, teens and adults by providing core services (support groups, monthly newsletter and counseling) at no charge. Founded in 1978, HOPE is an independent nonprofit community organization. Our purpose is to offer support, understanding, coping strategies, friendship and hope to the bereaved, as well as education, consultation and resources for their families, friends, employers, school/daycare staff, co-workers and invested professionals.