



# Coping With Grief and Loss for Agricultural Producers

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“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything,  
and your heart will certainly be wrung and  
possibly be broken.”

– C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, pg. 169

As humans, we are social beings who form strong relationships; when these relationships end, through death, divorce, or estrangement, it is natural to feel a sense of loss. This resource is meant to provide some ideas for agricultural producers (individuals and families) seeking to cope with and respond to losing a loved one. At the end of the resource, we have included additional information for agricultural producers experiencing other types of loss, such as losing the farm or livestock.

## Factors Influencing Loss of a Family Member or Friend

Researchers have identified several factors that influence the extent to which individuals feel distressed by a death (Mayo Clinic, 2021):

- **Closeness to the deceased.** Losing a life partner or immediate family member is more likely to result in significant loss than losing a friend or distant kin (Robson & Walter, 2012).
- **Timing of the loss.** Sudden and unexpected losses are often more distressing than gradual or anticipated losses.

- **Social support.** Being supported in grief is a strong predictor of outcomes (Cacciatore et al., 2021).

Some experiences with grief are clear, meaning some individuals may not feel profound sadness, or they may reach a time when they have worked through the grief, and it is no longer regularly present. Other deaths may result in complicated grief. These experiences may include profound feelings of sadness, anger, confusion, and other strong and ongoing emotions. Some people experiencing complicated grief may never feel that they have “gotten over it” or returned to “normal” and instead are learning to live with grief for many years.

In addition to factors specific to the loss, how individuals and families cope with the experience of grief is a strong predictor of outcomes. For agricultural producers, many messages can imply that crying, mourning, or feeling sad are not normal or that they are signs of weakness. There can be the expectation, from yourself, others, or the necessity of work, that after a few weeks (or even days), things should be back to normal (Devine, 2017). A common strategy for many people is to avoid their pain, such as by keeping themselves too busy to think about or remember the person who passed away. While this is a

reasonable response, research suggests that it does not work in the long term; in fact, trying to avoid grief has been linked with longer-lasting grief and greater distress (Eisme & Stroebe, 2021). Another common strategy for many people is rumination, thinking over and over again about the loss and dwelling on things they wish they could change. Again, this response is common; however, rumination is also linked with longer-lasting grief and greater distress (Eisme & Stroebe, 2021).

## Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) teaches people skills to respond differently to their thoughts and feelings (Hayes, 2019). Rather than avoiding or ruminating, these techniques can help agricultural producers take a step back from unhelpful thoughts and become willing to experience pain and difficulty in connection with what matters to them. Evidence suggests that as people use these skills, they experience less depression and better quality of life and can act more in line with what matters to them (Fernández-Rodríguez et al., 2018; Shallcross et al., 2010; Stockton et al., 2019).

## Early Views of Mourning

Early views of grief and mourning (e.g., Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005) organized responses into distinct stages, suggesting a neat, orderly process that was nearly universal (Stroebe et al., 2017). Often the end goal for experiencing grief was acceptance, which many people interpreted as meaning “get over it” or find closure. Recent research has refuted these ideas (Szuhany et al., 2021). Rather than a universal, orderly process with the end goal of closure or no more grief, grief is now known to be profoundly individual. People can follow different paths through grief, and the same person might experience grief differently over time.

## Tasks of Mourning

A more modern approach to grief is the Tasks of Mourning model (Worden, 2009). This approach takes an active view of mourning, suggesting specific tasks that individuals and families can

engage in as they learn to live with grief rather than avoiding it or ruminating on it excessively. Of note, there is no prescribed timeline for these activities. A person doesn’t have to think about things that can be done differently right away; rather, this may take time to become something that feels comfortable to do. For individuals, Worden suggests the following tasks:

1. **Acknowledge the reality of the loss rather than avoiding that it happened.**
2. **Make space for and process the pain of grief.** Allow grief to be present in your life.
3. **Adjust to a world without the deceased.** Are there things that can be done differently without this person present?
4. **Allow yourself to remember the deceased while also allowing yourself to experience positive emotions in life.**



Worden also suggests tasks for families as they seek to support one another in their grief. These tasks are:

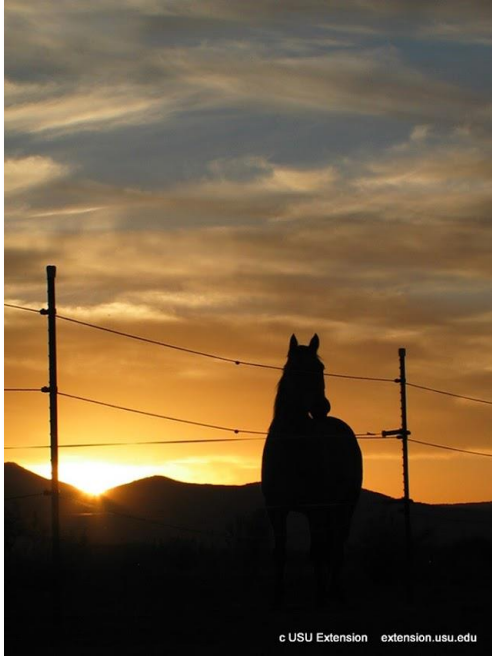
1. **Recognize loss and acknowledge the unique grief experiences of each family member.** Everyone can respond similarly or differently and adjust at their own pace.
2. **Reorganize family roles.** It may feel comfortable to have someone else in the family take over for certain tasks or family traditions, but for other traditions, perhaps it is more comfortable to not “replace” the deceased with another person. Discuss these decisions as a family.
3. **Reinvest in the family while maintaining a**

**sense of connection to the deceased.** The loss of one key person in a family may change the shape of the family, but it does not make the family itself less valuable.

**4. Create individual and shared meaning from the loss.**

As individuals and families actively work on these tasks, they can respond to their grief in ways that are more effective than avoidance or rumination, as discussed earlier.

Instead, they acknowledge their loss, let themselves feel it, discuss practical ways to address the changes that have occurred from this loss, and find meaning in loss.



## Languages of Grief

Another approach to mourning is the Languages of Grief model (Corless et al., 2014). This model helps family members understand different ways of experiencing grief and expressing it to others. People may experience grief through *verbal responses*, such as writing about feelings; *nonverbal responses*, such as fear or worry; *physical responses*, such as crying; and *physical actions*, such as visiting memorials (Corless et al., 2014). People express their grief to others in different “languages,” including storytelling, symbolic representations of the loss, metaphors, and analyzing their experience. When combined, the different modes of experiencing grief and languages of expressing it to others show various ways to manifest grief. This means that, contrary to the old stage model of grief (Kübler-Ross & Kessler,

2005), there is no “normal” or “correct” way to grieve. Each person and family member has different needs.

## Ideas for Application

While all individuals and families experience grief in a unique way (Devine, 2017), here are some potential actions to try based on acceptance and commitment therapy (Harris, 2021) and the Tasks of Mourning (Worden, 2009) and Languages of Grief (Corless et al., 2014) models.

- 1. Write about your experiences.** If you enjoy writing, you may find it helpful to record your answers to [these questions](#) about the influence of the person you lost in your life. Go slow; answer just one or two questions in a sitting, and then come back to them when you are ready. Getting your thoughts on paper is a powerful way to acknowledge your experience rather than avoiding it or ruminating on it. This activity also creates a space for grief to be present in your life.
- 2. Talk with someone else.** Getting and giving support are powerful ways to process grief (Scott et al., 2020). If you know someone who is also mourning the loss—a family member, friend, neighbor, or coworker—consider having a conversation with them where you share your experiences. Just being with another person who is similarly hurting can help to ease some pain. Support groups are also very helpful for finding others that are living with, or who have lived with, similar pain. Support groups exist in most counties through hospice providers, an Area Agency on Aging, residential care facilities, and online. In cases of complicated grief following a violent or unexpected death, or death preceded by a long-term illness, individuals appreciate finding support groups or supportive others specifically for their situation (support specifically for death from suicide, death of a child, death following cancer or dementia, etc.).



### 3. Consider your personal “language” of grief.

Try expressing your grief in different ways, such as through storytelling, symbols, metaphors, or analyzing what is helpful for you now (Corless et al., 2014). Is there a way that feels more natural or intuitive to you? If others are mourning the loss, what languages of grief do they seem most inclined to use? See if you can make space for any differences in how you are both processing your experience.

### 4. Remind yourself you are human.

It is entirely natural to hurt after losing someone you care about. This does not mean that there is anything wrong with you; in fact, it means that you are human, just like everyone else. You may find it helpful to create a short phrase (Harris, 2021) that reminds you that you are hurting and need some grace. Examples could be, “This hurts. Go easy on yourself,” or “I’m in pain; it’s okay to feel this,” or “Hello, Grief. You are back. I know you are allowed to be here.”

## Other Losses

While this discussion has focused on grief following the loss of a loved one, other situations can also yield feelings of loss. Agricultural producers may experience losses of production, crops, or the heir of their family business leaving for “greener pastures.” These experiences can be clear, short-lived, and not too challenging, or they can be complicated, ongoing, and very profound and intense. Additional resources include GriefLink (2021) for coping with loss from the [death or sale of livestock](#) or Linquist’s fact sheet (2019) on [losing the production](#) itself. While not involving death, these other losses can be deeply painful and have an intense impact on well-being. The same techniques discussed above for experiencing grief after death have also been shown to help in living with other types of loss. If you have experienced a painful loss, work through the exercises above. Do they help you think less about “getting over it” and more about living with it in healthier ways?

## Conclusion

Coping with and responding to grief and loss is a common, though rarely discussed, experience for agricultural producers. Everyone experiences these things differently, and it is normal to cope differently from your family or friends. Even within a single person, grief may be stronger for losing one person than it was for losing another person. Be patient with the process while doing what you can to engage in the tasks of mourning. Some days, you may have a lot more energy to engage in active processing; other days, you may find that you just need to take a break from it all. Remember that taking a break is healthier than avoiding it altogether. The goal is not to avoid emotions but to live with them in healthier ways over the long term. If you find that you are still struggling with intense grief a year after a death of a loved one or after your loss, it may be helpful to have more support in working through things. A professional counselor or grief/loss support group can be excellent resources and positively impact most who engage with them (Szuhany et al., 2021).



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