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3-8-2023

### Meditations on Loss and Grief: Loss is a universal human experience - How can we cope with it?

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#### Recommended Citation

Tahmaseb-McConatha, J. (2023). Meditations on Loss and Grief: Loss is a universal human experience - How can we cope with it?. *Psychology Today* Retrieved from [https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/psych\\_facpub/67](https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/psych_facpub/67)

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Jasmin Tahmaseb-McConatha Ph.D.  
Live Long and Prosper

[GRIEF](#)

# Meditations on Loss and Grief

Loss is a universal human experience: How can we cope with it?

Posted March 8, 2023 | \_Reviewed by Gary Drevitch

## THE BASICS

- [Understanding Grief](#)
- [Find counselling to heal from grief](#)

## KEY POINTS

- The painful experience of loss is universal; many people will face multiple losses throughout their lives.
- Cultural messages of later life are filled with expectations and anticipation of loss that shape how people mourn.
- Immersion in the natural world can help people cope with loss and heal.



March 22 is the birthday of my dear friend who died suddenly two years ago. Every day, I miss and think about her. Without her, my world is a very different place. Since that painful loss, there have been several other traumatic losses. As I have attempted to accept the new reality I am faced with, I have explored how loss impacts a person's reality.

My work has focused on well-being in later life, so I have addressed the ways that we attempt to keep ourselves well and happy as we age. Over the years, I have interviewed many older adults from various cultural backgrounds about their health, well-being, life satisfaction, and the ways that communities and societies both aid and hinder their happiness. Frequently, their responses focus on how they struggle to cope with loss and trauma. For some time now, I have struggled to write about this topic.

## How do we cope with loss?

It has been difficult for me. Not only have I lost my friend, but I have also lost a nephew, my dear 15-year-old pet, and other friends. I have experienced the serious illness of a dear friend and the immobility of my partner—it has been an overwhelmingly difficult time.

I am certainly not alone in my struggles to cope. The painful experience of loss is universal. The past three years have changed the lives of every person on the planet. The pandemic has resulted in multiple losses for most people. As the pandemic wanes and we re-emerge into a new social reality, the tenuousness of our lives leaves us feeling bruised and anxious. For older adults, life can seem even more fragile.

While there are gains and losses across the life cycle, later life is more textured with loss. Age-related losses have been well documented and are, in fact, the expectation, both on an individual and social level. Cultural messages of later life are filled with ways of coping with loss, losses in health, mobility, and death. When I interviewed older women and men on how they manage to cope with loss, one question that I have been asked is: How can I eat, drink, and make plans, when I am overcome with thoughts about the people and the life I have lost? How can I experience pleasure when my loved one is no longer able to?

All too often, there is no breathing space to sort out such fundamental questions before we experience a new loss. If we are faced with multiple losses, we experience cumulative and more complicated grief. Cumulative grief, associated with multiple losses, has a profound impact on well-being. Cumulative grief does not give us space to mourn one loss before we are faced with the next. It does not enable us to adapt to the world without our loved ones. It does not allow us the time to envision how our loss shapes our new reality.

The need to come to terms with a loss, to give time and space to mourn, and to see what our life looks like in the context of what we have lost is an important step in grieving. It allows us to remember who and what we have lost and what that loss means to our lives moving forward. As I struggle to come to terms with the painful life experiences of multiple losses, I have asked those around me, personally and in the context of my research: How do they cope, and how do they manage to go on in the face of pain and loss?

These philosophical questions are certainly not new; each of us must struggle in our own ways to answer them. There are, however, common threads in how we cope with our loss. We can find relief by relying on our spiritual beliefs or religion, communing with nature, developing satisfying relationships, and relying on community.

Social scientists have conducted considerable research on the process of grief and mourning. I have given many community talks about coping with loss. In these talks, I have often relied on the excellent work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross to explain the possible stages of grief and mourning. These include denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. While I have experienced each of these stages in the past two years, there has been no particular pattern of how and when they emerged. Many of the people I have interviewed have discussed the stages in the context of how they helped them manage their emotions. What I have found to be most helpful in coping with my recent losses is reliance on the adaptive power of immersing myself in the natural world, when possible, and in virtual nature if natural spaces are not accessible.

One therapy that has been most helpful to me is *shinrin-yoku*, or forest bathing. Originating in Japan, *shinrin-yoku* is a form of therapy focused on integrating one's senses into natural spaces. It is a healing ritual that has helped me and others to cope with and understand loss. Connecting with

something greater than the self enables people to weave new meaning into an altered life.

Nature therapy can complement religious or spiritual beliefs. Shinrin-yoku helps us feel connected with nature through touch, smell, sight, and sound. Immersing ourselves in the natural world can help to soothe our bruised body and spirit. Studies have found both physical and psychological benefits to time in natural green and blue spaces. On the one hand, immersion in the natural world can connect us with those we have lost; on the other hand, it can help us stop ruminating about the pain of that loss.

Each of our lives is filled with loss. We have to find ways to grieve that work for us. There is no one way to grieve or cope with loss. But as we age, the fragility of self, and the anticipation of losses, can keep us from living life fully. We consider that maybe there is no time for those plans, no time to complete our “bucket list.” The key is to find a way to live as fully as possible, no matter how much or how little time we might have.

In the shadow of grief, we can try to move forward, live our lives, make our plans, and know that at some point, grief and loss will be our companions. Grieving is a process that may last a lifetime. As we engage in our cultural rituals, leaving a chair for those who are missing, or making a toast to someone no longer with us, we keep our lives richer through our memories. In the shadow of grief, those small rituals of remembrance do not debilitate us. The pandemic resulted in collective loss and trauma. In its wake, there is a need for each of us to recognize our time limitations and appreciate the social and natural world.

*“Grief can be the garden of compassion. If you keep your heart open through everything, your pain can become your greatest ally in your life’s search for love and wisdom.”* — Rumi