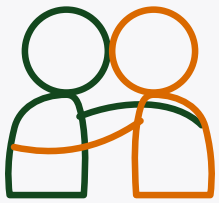
GRIEF · FOR COUPLES

GRIEVING TOGETHER

Grief doesn't just happen inside one person. It moves through a relationship, and it often pulls two people in different directions right when they need each other most. This is a short map of what grief is, and how to stay close inside it rather than drifting into separate rooms.



WHAT GRIEF IS

- **It comes in waves, not stages.** The idea of five neat stages you pass through and finish is a myth that leaves people feeling like they're grieving wrong. Grief arrives in waves that rise and fall, often without warning, set off by a song, a date, an empty chair. The waves don't mean you're going backward.
- **You'll swing between facing it and stepping away.** Researchers call this the dual process model of grief: some hours you turn toward the loss and feel it fully, other hours you focus on ordinary life. Stepping away isn't avoidance. The swing is how a person carries something this heavy without being crushed by it.
- **Grief lives in the body.** Fatigue, brain fog, a short fuse, changes in appetite and sleep are all normal. Feeling physically wrung out is part of grieving, not a sign you're weak.
- **There's no timeline, and there are hidden losses inside the main one.** Alongside the person you lost are the smaller losses: routines, roles, a version of the future you were counting on. Those deserve grief too.
- **When more loss is coming, you may grieve ahead of it.** Grieving before a loss fully arrives is its own experience, called anticipatory grief. Bracing for something that hasn't happened yet is exhausting, and it counts.

CARRYING THEM FORWARD

Healing isn't leaving someone behind, it's finding a way to carry the relationship forward in a changed form. You keep their stories, mark their dates, and talk about them out loud. You don't close the door on them, you make a place for them to stay.

WHY COUPLES DRIFT APART IN GRIEF

- **You almost certainly grieve differently.** One of you may process by feeling and talking, the other by doing and staying busy. Both are grief. The most common rupture is one partner reading the other's style as not caring, when it's just a different language for the same pain.
- **Your waves won't line up.** You'll rarely be devastated at the same moment, so one of you is often steadier while the other goes under. That mismatch feels like distance, but it's a chance to take turns.
- **Protecting each other can turn into silence.** Many couples stay quiet to spare each other, each grieving alone in the next room to avoid being a burden. The intention is kind, and the result is loneliness inside the same house.

HOW TO COME TOGETHER

- **Say your styles out loud.** 'I need to talk about it' and 'I need to keep moving' are both ways of grieving. Say which one you are so neither reads the other as cold.
- **Ask which kind of day it is.** A simple check-in, 'are you in a feeling day or a doing day?', tells you what your partner needs before you guess wrong.
- **Take turns being the steady one.** When your partner is the one going under, you don't have to fix it. Being the calm, present one for that hour is the whole job.
- **Grieve together on purpose.** Share a memory, light a candle, visit a place, look at photos side by side. Joint rituals turn grief from a wedge into something you carry as a team.
- **Turn toward the small bids.** A sigh, a long look, a hand reaching across the couch are the moments where closeness is kept or lost. Answer them.
- **Don't make each other your only support.** Two grieving people can't be one another's entire lifeline. Lean on friends, family, a group, a therapist.

WHEN GRIEF MAKES SOMEONE SNAPPIER

Grief floods the nervous system, which leaves far less bandwidth for patience. Irritability and anger are two of the most common, least-talked-about faces of grief, and the anger often goes to the safest person in the room, usually the partner. Being snapped at is rarely about you. It's displaced pain, aimed at the person it trusts most to still be there afterward.

- **Repair fast:** 'That was my grief talking, not you. I'm sorry.' A quick repair keeps small snaps from stacking into distance.
- **On the receiving end:** try not to take the sharp edge personally, while still not accepting cruelty. Those two can coexist. If they snap 'you never help with anything,' you can hear the grief under it and still say, 'I'll handle dinner tonight, and I'm not okay being talked to that way.'
- **Build in recovery time** so a fried nervous system isn't constantly asked to perform patience it doesn't have.

MORE COPING SKILLS

- **Ride the wave, don't fight it.** A grief burst peaks and passes faster when you let it move through than when you brace against it.
- **Write to the person,** in unsent letters or a running journal.
- **Move the body** to metabolize the stress chemicals grief pumps out. A walk counts.
- **Self-compassion:** speak to yourself the way you'd speak to a grieving friend.
- **Both/and:** moments of joy aren't betrayal. Let them in without guilt.
- **Contain it when you must:** a scheduled 'grief window,' with permission to fall apart inside it, so it doesn't flood a whole workday. For example, twenty minutes after dinner with the door closed and a photo out, so the feeling has somewhere to go instead of surfacing in the middle of a 2 p.m. meeting.
- **Lower the bar** on everything non-essential, and delay big decisions.
- **During a wave, come back to the body:** feet on the floor, notice five things you can sense, one slow breath out.

HOLDING BOUNDARIES WHILE YOUR PARTNER GRIEVES

Grief explains behavior, it doesn't erase impact or hand out a pass for cruelty. You can be gentle and firm at once.

- **Give more grace on the small stuff,** hold the line on the non-negotiables (contempt, cruelty, anything unsafe).
- **The script:** 'I know you're hurting, and I still can't be spoken to that way.' Compassion and the boundary in the same breath.
- **Repair, don't collect.** After a snap, a small repair from either side keeps resentment from building up.
- **Don't dissolve into the endless container.** If you become the person who absorbs everything and needs nothing, you'll burn out and the resentment will outlast the grief. Your needs still count.
- **Pick the moment:** raise it once the wave has passed, not mid-flood.

FROM OPTION B (SANDBERG & GRANT)

Three beliefs stall recovery: **personalization** (this is my fault), **pervasiveness** (this ruins everything), and **permanence** (this will always feel this way). Noticing which one has hold of you loosens its grip. Two more ideas worth borrowing: ask "how are you today?" instead of "how are you?", and support your partner the way they want to be supported, not the way you would.

Grief isn't a problem to solve, it's something you carry, and you can carry it as a team. Draws on the dual process model of grief (Stroebe & Schut), continuing bonds (Klass, Silverman & Nickman), intuitive and instrumental grieving styles (Doka & Martin), turning toward bids (the Gottman Institute), and the three P's from Sheryl Sandberg & Adam Grant's *Option B*. My Mental Climb is not affiliated with or endorsed by these authors or institutes.

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