

# Helping Others with Grief



## A Practical Guide Using the Transcending Model of Grief and Loss



Grief Is Not a Problem to Fix  
It Is a Journey to Accompany



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# GRIEF ISN'T A STRAIGHT LINE IT'S A NEW LANDSCAPE TO NAVIGATE

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When someone you care about is grieving, the instinct is often to find the right thing to say, offer solutions, or help them “move forward.” This instinct is rooted in a common misunderstanding of grief as a predictable process with stages that lead to acceptance or closure. In reality, grief is not something we “get over.” It is a profoundly personal experience that shifts over time, and something we learn to carry and integrate into our lives in different ways. Most grieving people do not need to be fixed; they need presence, patience, and permission to grieve in their own way.

The Transcending Model of Grief and Loss (TMGL) offers a way to understand grief as an ongoing and deeply personal experience, rather than a checklist of emotions or a set of steps to complete. Instead of stages, the TMGL describes four *spaces* of grief—different ways grief can show up and be lived over time. These spaces reflect how loss shapes a person’s sense of self, relationships, and view of the world.



The spaces are not ordered or time-limited. People may move between them unpredictably, return to certain spaces again and again, or experience more than one space at the same time. There is no “right” pace and no correct path through grief.

Viewing grief through these spaces helps supporters let go of the urge to fix, explain, or push someone forward. Because grief changes over time, understanding the spaces makes it easier to notice what a person may need in a particular moment and to respond with patience and care rather than assumptions.

In the pages that follow, we introduce each of the four spaces of grief and offer practical questions and supportive phrases to help you care for someone who is grieving. The goal is not to guide their grief, but to offer steadiness, understanding, and presence as they move through it in their own way.

# The Four Spaces of Grief

## Uncharted Territory: Living With the Awareness That Loss Is Possible



Uncharted Territory refers to the space *before* a specific loss has occurred. It is not defined by anticipation of a particular event, but by a growing awareness that loss is real, possible, and inevitable. In this space, people are not yet grieving a particular loss, but their assumptions about safety and permanence are impacted.

Often, this awareness emerges after witnessing loss in others, through family, friends, community events, or broader societal experiences. Life may continue as usual on the surface, while internally there is a sense of standing at the edge of something unknown.

In the TMGL, this space is often described using the highway metaphor. Most of the time, we move through life assuming the road will continue smoothly. We know accidents happen, but we don't expect a sharp turn. Grief journeys start even before loss happens personally.

What you might see in others:

- A heightened awareness of fragility and impermanence
- Subtle unease or disillusionment rather than acute distress
- Increased reflection on mortality, relationships, or meaning
- Shifts in priorities or values, such as holding loved ones more closely or being more intentional with time
- Oscillation between “this won’t happen to me” and “this could happen to anyone”

Examples:

- After a friend’s parents’ death, someone becomes aware that loss is not as distant as they once believed.
- Becoming a parent or caregiver brings a new awareness of vulnerability and limited control.
- Exposure to collective or community loss reshapes assumptions about safety and predictability.
- Developmental milestones (aging parents, midlife transitions) quietly alter one’s sense of time and permanence.

## Initial Reaction



Initial Reaction refers to the space that begins when a loss is no longer theoretical and becomes real. This space can include a wide range of responses when someone realizes that life is not like it was before. In the Initial Reaction space, people are responding to the immediate impact of loss. Their internal and external worlds may feel out of sync as they attempt to orient themselves to a changed reality. This space often includes the hours, days, or weeks following a loss, though the duration and intensity can vary widely depending on the type of loss, the relationship, and the surrounding context.

Using the visual metaphor, the Initial Reaction is the moment storm or tornado hits. The road is suddenly torn apart and unrecognizable. What once felt familiar and predictable is disrupted.

What you might see in others:

- Shock, numbness, or disbelief as the loss registers
- Strong emotional responses that may shift quickly (sadness, anger, confusion)
- Difficulty concentrating, making decisions, or retaining information
- A sense of being on “autopilot”
- Heightened need for information, reassurance, or proximity to others or a desire for solitude
- Physical responses such as exhaustion, disrupted sleep, or changes in appetite

Examples:

- In the days following a death, a person manages logistics and responsibilities while feeling emotionally detached or unreal.
- After an unexpected breakup or job loss, someone feels disoriented and unsure how to make sense of what just happened.
- Following a miscarriage or traumatic event, a person experiences waves of overwhelming emotions alongside periods of numbness.

## Lost/Adrift Space



The Lost/Adrift space emerges after the initial shock of loss has passed and the reality of the loss has settled in. In this space, the immediate disruption may no longer feel as intense, but the absence left by the loss becomes more apparent. Familiar routines, roles, relationships, or aspects of identity may no longer fit, leaving people feeling unmoored and unsure of how to move forward.

Lost/Adrift is described as entering a dark forest. The path that once felt clear is no longer visible, and familiar landmarks are gone. Movement may feel slow or uncertain, and it can be difficult to know which direction leads forward. People may feel turned around, stuck, or tempted to stop altogether, not because they are failing, but because the terrain itself is so disorienting.

What you might see in others:

- A sense of disorientation or feeling “lost” in daily life
- Difficulty reengaging with routines, work, or social roles
- Heightened fatigue, heaviness, or emotional numbness
- Increased questioning of identity, purpose, or belonging
- Withdrawal from others or frustration when others expect “normal” functioning

- Grief that feels more pronounced as external support decreases

Examples:

- Struggles with daily routines that once felt automatic.
- After a divorce, a person feels uncertain about their identity and place in the world.
- After a significant role change, such as becoming an empty nester or losing a long-held job, a person feels unanchored and unsure of what comes next.

## Transcending Space



The Transcending space reflects a shift in how people develop their own unique process for integrating loss into their lives. It does not mean that grief has ended or that the loss no longer matters. Instead, this space represents a growing capacity to carry grief with greater awareness, choice, and connection, even as it remains present.

In Transcending, the loss becomes part of a broader personal narrative rather than the sole organizing force of daily life. People may begin to experience moments of meaning, clarity, or re-engagement alongside ongoing grief. Identity continues to evolve here—not by returning to who someone was before the loss, but by integrating how the loss has shaped who they are becoming.

Using the landscape metaphor, Transcending reflects a growing familiarity with the mountain of loss. The mountain remains present, but a path begins to take shape; sometimes around it, sometimes alongside it. The terrain may still be uneven, yet there are clearer moments of direction and increased confidence in navigating the landscape, even when the intensity resurfaces.

What you might see in others:

- Increased emotional flexibility, with grief and other emotions coexisting
- Meaning-making that feels personal
- Intentional ways of honoring the loss (rituals, storytelling, etc)
- Re-engagement with values, relationships, or pursuits that matter
- Ongoing waves of grief that feel more manageable or familiar

Examples:

- Someone establishes a personal ritual to honor a loved one while continuing to build a meaningful life.
- A person redefines priorities in ways that reflect both the loss and future hopes.
- Grief still emerges at anniversaries or milestones, but the individual feels better equipped to navigate those moments.

# Empathy for Grieving People

When someone is grieving, the most supportive response is often not advice, reassurance, or a new perspective, but instead offering empathy. Empathy in grief is not about making someone feel better; it is about helping them feel understood.

Reflection is a core expression of empathy. It means listening closely and then repeating back what you hear in a way that shows you have grasped the person's emotional experience, meaning, or sense of loss. Reflection stays close to the speaker's words and feelings. It does not correct them, reframe the situation, or try to move the conversation toward hope, growth, or resolution. Its purpose is to communicate, *"I hear you, and I'm with you in this."*

This can feel counterintuitive, especially in cultures that value problem-solving and positivity. When we care about someone, our instinct is often to reassure ("It will get better"), advise ("Here's what might help"), or reframe ("Try to look at it this new way"). While these responses are usually well-intended, they can unintentionally shift attention away from the person's lived experience. In grief, advice and reframing often come too soon. They may minimize pain, create pressure to cope differently, or signal that the grief needs to be improved.

Reflecting, by contrast, allows grief to exist without being altered. It names the feeling, impact, or meaning the person is expressing. Reflection does not fix grief; it makes space for it. Over time, being accurately reflected can help grieving individuals feel less alone in what they are carrying.

The table that follows illustrates the differences between reflecting, offering advice, and reframing in common grief conversations. The goal is not to say the perfect thing, but to practice staying close to what the grieving person is actually experiencing.

<b>What the Person Says</b>	<b>Reflect (Empathic Response)</b>	<b>Advice or Reframe (Often Unhelpful in Grief)</b>
"I feel completely lost."	"You feel untethered right now."	"At least you have people to support you."
"Everyone expects me to be okay."	"It feels lonely to be struggling."	"They probably mean well."
"I miss them so much."	"You miss them deeply."	"At least you have good memories."
"I'm angry all the time."	"Its hard to feel so angry."	"Anger is one of the stages, so you have to accept it."
"I don't recognize myself anymore."	"This loss has really changed how you see yourself."	"You'll get back to who you were."
"Some days I feel fine, and then I feel guilty."	"Each day can bring a different emotion."	"Don't feel guilty, you didn't do anything wrong."
"I'm tired of being strong."	"You're exhausted from carrying so much."	"God doesn't give you more than you can handle."
"It still hurts just as much."	"The pain is still very present."	"Give it time, it will get better."
"I don't know how to do life like this."	"Life feels overwhelming without what/who you lost."	"You will find your way eventually."
"I feel forgotten now."	"It hurts to feel alone in this."	"You know people are still thinking about you and love you."

# Questions and Phrases to Support Grief Through the TMGL Spaces

The Transcending Model of Grief and Loss (TMGL) provides a framework for how grief changes over time, suggesting that support may need to shift accordingly. To highlight how grief evolves and changes the landscape people navigate, we offer questions and phrases to model how to offer support. These phrases are designed to meet people where they are, acknowledge the complexity of grief, and gently expand how grief is understood, without rushing, fixing, or directing the process.

Even well-intended support can miss the moment. The questions and phrases in this section are offered as a framework for attuned support, not as a script or set of instructions.

The goal is not to guide someone through grief or help them “move on,” but to offer steadiness, presence, and language that fits the moment. Not every question will be right for every person or situation. Presence and willingness to stay connected matter more than saying the “right” thing.

## **Uncharted Territory: *Before loss has occurred, awareness of vulnerability***

### Questions You Might Ask

- “How has seeing this happen to others changed how you think about things?”
- “What feels most important to protect or hold onto at the moment?”
- “Has this awareness shifted what feels most important in your life?”

### Things You Might Say

- “It makes sense that this would change how you see the world.”
- “You don’t have to know what to do with this awareness yet.”
- “The awareness of losses can show up long before actual losses do.”

How this helps: It normalizes grief-related awareness before loss and reframes unease as a human response to vulnerability, not anxiety to eliminate.

## **Initial Reaction: *The loss has occurred; the world has been disrupted***

### Questions You Might Ask

- “Do you want to talk about what happened, or not right now?”
- “Would it help if I stayed with you for a bit?”
- “What feels like too much to deal with today?”
- “Have you eaten or showered or slept at all today?”

### Things You Might Say

- “There’s no right way to respond to something like this.”
- “I can stay, even if we don’t talk.”
- “You don’t have to make sense of this right now.”
- “It’s okay if your reactions change moment to moment.”
- “I am here with you, even though there are no words that can fix it.”

### Phrases to Avoid in Initial Reaction

- “Everything happens for a reason.”
- “At least...”
- “You’ll get through this.”
- “Be strong.”
- “Let me know if you need anything.” (without follow-through)

## **Lost / Adrift *The shock has passed; identity and meaning feel disrupted***

### Questions You Might Ask

- “What feels hardest now that others may not see?”
- “What feels most unclear or unsettled at the moment?”
- “How has this loss changed how you see yourself?”
- “What are other losses connected to this one that people might not realize?”
- “What helps you get through the days when this feels especially heavy?”
- “What do you wish people understood about how this feels now?”

### Things You Might Say

- “It makes sense that this feels heavy.”
- “There’s no timeline or predictable method for finding your way through.”
- “You’re not doing this wrong; this has changed you profoundly.”

- “A lot of grief happens after the shock wears off.”
- “Nothing is wrong with you for feeling lost.”
- “Loss changes who we are, not just how we feel.”
- “This isn’t too much for me, I’m here to listen.”

How this helps: It challenges the myth that grief should lessen steadily over time and validates ongoing identity disruption as part of loss.

### **Transcending *Grief is being integrated***

#### Questions You Might Ask

- “How has this loss shaped you?”
- “What feels important to remember as you go forward?”
- “What are the ways you’ve found to honor what was lost?”
- “What feels important to you these days?”

#### Things You Might Say

- “This loss will always impact you, even as new parts of your life take shape.”
- “You’re not leaving grief behind; you’re learning how to carry it.”
- “I notice how you honor what was lost in ways that feel true to you.”
- “It makes sense that grief still shows up, even as other parts of life expand, since there is no timeline to grief.”

How this helps: It reframes meaning-making as integration rather than closure and honors growth without implying resolution.

A Final Note: You do not need to identify someone’s “space” or move them toward another one. Grief is not a problem to solve. Your presence, language, and willingness to stay with uncertainty can help grieving individuals feel seen and can gently expand how grief is understood, both for them and for you.

## Types of Grief Support

Social support plays a central role in the grieving process. In conversations with grieving individuals, people often emphasize how deeply supportive connections can be or how painful their absence feels. While the value of social support is widely recognized, identifying *specific* ways to offer it is often less clear.

Cacciatore et al. (2021) examined how grieving individuals experience and value social support and identified four distinct categories of support. The chart below defines each category and provides examples of how these forms of support may show up in grief. As you review the chart, consider which types of support may feel most meaningful to offer the people you care about.

Type of Support	Definition	Specific Examples in Grief
<b>Emotional Support</b>	Expressions of care, empathy, validation, and presence that help a grieving person feel understood and less alone. Emotional support centers on listening and being with, rather than fixing or advising.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sitting quietly with someone without pressure to talk</li> <li>• Saying, “I’m here with you,” or “This really hurts”</li> <li>• Allowing tears, anger, or silence without redirecting</li> <li>• Checking in over time, not just immediately after the loss</li> <li>• Allowing them to talk about their loved one</li> </ul>
<b>Instrumental (Tangible) Support</b>	Practical, hands-on assistance that reduces daily burdens and conserves emotional and physical energy for the grieving person.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bringing meals or coordinating a meal train</li> <li>• Helping with childcare, errands, or transportation</li> <li>• Assisting with funeral logistics or paperwork</li> <li>• Taking care of routine tasks when energy is low</li> </ul>

Type of Support	Definition	Specific Examples in Grief
<b>Informational Support</b>	Providing relevant information, resources, or guidance that helps someone navigate unfamiliar or overwhelming aspects of loss. This support should be offered gently and without pressure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing information on practical next steps after a death when asked</li> <li>• Helping locate legal, financial, or workplace resources</li> <li>• Offering knowledge about what grief responses are through the spaces metaphor of TMGL</li> </ul>
<b>Appraisal Support (Peer Connection)</b>	Support that comes from connecting with others who have experienced similar types of loss. This form of support helps grieving individuals feel understood through shared experience and reduces isolation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appraisal support is a personal choice for the griever. Rather than assuming shared experiences, support may involve encouraging connection with communities they resonate with, as many find it helpful to engage with others who understand a specific type of loss (e.g., stillbirth, disability, cancer, military).</li> </ul>

Citation: Cacciatore J, Thieleman K, Fretts R, Jackson LB (2021) What is good grief support? Exploring the actors and actions in social support after traumatic grief. PLoS ONE 16(5): e0252324.  
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