



Sights and Sounds of Grief: Ancestral Voices and Pictorial Images as Posthumous Neurocognitive Means of Healing and Hope

Eric Rogers

Emergency Medicine Physician, Glens Falls, NY, USA

Corresponding Author: Eric Rogers., Emergency Medicine Physician, Glens Falls, NY, USA.

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Introduction

This research study conducted examined how digital photographic legacies expressed in both pictorial images and media voice recordings affect, shape and impact mourning and remembrance relative to a person's experience with grief and loss. Efforts were initiated to examine a person's ability to address grief and also emotionally heal in the face of death and loss. A qualitative methodology was utilized in collecting archival and social data gathered through intensive media-elicitative interviews, journal articles, professional reports, researcher-generated photography, and extant data collections.

The data collected was triangulated to reflect and reveal the interrelationship and intersection of the impact, influence and impotence between pictorial images and ancestral voices relative to persons who have suffered loss and thus grief via deaths of loved ones, family, friends, pets, etc.

The findings demonstrate the profound impact of digital photographic legacies on mourning and remembrance, and that creatively working with inherited photographs is an essential task in bereavement. Digital photographs and media voice recordings left behind empower mourners to recall everyday life in rich detail, to recognize, to remember and to reflect on the personality of the deceased, to feel close, and to reconnect with them. Further, inherited pictorial images or photographs, videos, etc. and recorded ancestral voices may alleviate grief by allowing mourners to experience missed periods of the deceased's life, to learn about their respective hidden facets, fears, and feelings and to be reassured about their meaningful lives (whether good, bad ugly and/or indifferent). Further, such may also be render possible answers to the questions of why in terms of guilt in many cases of suicide, and thus to reconstruct the deceased's biography.

This research study further articulates and advocates for present and future initiatives to emphasize a refocusing of therapeutic interest and an investment in pictorial images (albeit photography, videos, etc.) and also audio multi-media platforms as research on pictorial images and ancestral voice recordings' commemorate numerous functions. The research further suggests that the issues and experiences of grief,

loss, death, mourning and bereavement specifically encompassing photographic images, and oral and social recordings could benefit in terms of psychological and emotional healing, reconciliation with persons and issues from the past as well as retribution on the premise making peace with past pain. Through a consideration of advancing therapeutic grief techniques, such tools utilizing pictorial images or digital photographs and media based ancestral oral or voice recordings, the initiatives could very well serve effective and proficient mechanisms for healing and hope. To recall, to revisit the past and to reclaim persons of such past, to re-expose and to reflect on loss and grief in said capacities effectuates powerful and riveting quests for collective measures and means of healing. The research undertaking further engulfs understanding the role of photography and or pictorial images as tools for scaffolding narratives of loss.

In addition, an intense examination into the role of pictorial images and aligned with recorded ancestral voices in preserving the continuing bonds with the deceased provided insight into the extent and the context of grief experienced by individuals. The role of photography as a technology of the self for emotional self-regulation was further explored. In addition, photography was seen and used as a process in the reviewing of the contextualized grief-loss experience. The research reflects the presence of psychological and emotional healing impressions amidst the sights and sounds of grief as expressed through ancestral voices and pictorial images. That such provides and may continue to provide positive and effectual impacts in the healing process in terms of posthumous neurocognitive meaning to those who suffered grief through loss.

Grief Loss Pictorial Images Posthumous Ancestral Voices

When we lose important people in our lives, our photos can bring back memories of them and help us to remember everything that made them special and unique. They help us keep that deceased person alive in our minds, through stories and memories — and that's an important part of making sure our loved ones' legacies live on. They are also influential in terms of effectuating healing and hope beyond hurt and provide hope for persons who are in disarray, who are discouraged and who are disillusioned going forward.

When we lose people (and pets) who are special to us, we often tend to dwell on how they died. If the person was sick for a long time with a terminal illness, the memories of the person's health struggles often stay first and foremost in our minds when we think of that person. Or if we feel any guilt about the person's passing, we often focus on that.

All is not well on this side of heaven. Tunnel vision often emerges out of both choice and chaos regarding the life cessation of another. Such is common to man; however, an emerging phenomenon indicative of ancestral images or photos coagulated with the sounds of voices from the past deceased love ones offer a new glimpse into a space of consciousness and contentment in terms of addressing closure, unresolved issues and conspicuous concern for one's departed loved one and one's own sanity and resolve.

Through the creative artistic usage of photos and their inherent value, one is able to retain precious past moments, experiences, encounters and places and spaces in times dear to us. Through ancestral images of photographs and sensitive moments in historical life experiences, our love ones are brought from seemingly ancient ages past to a modern present day virtual reality before our very memory and sight. Posthumously, in essence, ancestral images or photos of ancestors bring our loved one's prior existence, experiential contact and importance to us full circle and not just their passing.

The precious images and encapsulated moments of significance are now encased. As ancestral images enter the human psyche or are brought forth from the depths of our conscience in far reaching ways their significance and meaning become etched in the human soul. The photos and recorded ancestral voices exist in arguably complicated capacities, but can remind us in unsolicited ways, the relevance and importance of healing by re-visitation, recollection, reflection and revelation of those we love in terms of:

- *The unique way they lived.*
- *Their personalities, passions and hobbies.*
- *How they impacted our lives, and why they were and are still so important to us.*
- *The memories (and moments) we most want to remember when we think of them.*

In effect, pictorial images and ancestral voices provide profound intrinsic power and perplexities intertwined with energy and efforts to enable us to process grief and loss and mourning on our own terms, in our own time, in our own ways.

It can be healing and helpful to look at pictures of the loved one you've lost – whether it's one day, one month, or one year after he or she has died. It's healthy to hold on to old memories — you don't need to cast them off in a forced effort to “move on.” Spend time going through old photo albums or image files, and reflect on the happy and memorable times you had with your loved one. Reminiscing can make you feel better when you are missing your loved one, and sharing stories and photos with your family and friends can help keep memories of your loved one alive. That sharing process can also help you work through your grief.

Secondly, the display and dialogue of displaying your loved one's photos often provide numerous intriguing and internal struggles of both strength and solitude as well as soul searching and sorrow necessary for healing. People often shy away from putting photos of people who have died into their albums or frames, but sometimes it's far more painful to rid your house of all photographic evidence of these loved ones. It can be healing and comforting to have photos of people you miss around your

home. When you're trying to choose photos to display, the key question you should ask yourself is, “Does this image bring to mind a happy or sweet memory, or does it just make me feel sad?” If the photo makes you feel happy or eases your grief, one could think about displaying it in one of their albums or frames. If not, it may be therapeutically best served to not offer disclosure by way of storage.

And then third, it is imperative to use the imaginative process of having psychological resilience expressed through memorial tribute videos.

A slideshow tribute video, made up of photos of a loved one, is a lovely and meaningful way to say goodbye to a friend or family member during a funeral or memorial service. Creative efforts to construct ancestral images or photos along aside voice based sounds offer a dual healing attempt to accentuate recovery from loss. If the end goal is to create your own tribute video, remembering that the main purpose of the ancestral images, photos expressed via video is to illustrate how the person lived. Select photos that share the person's hobbies, passions, and interests, and showcase the friends and family members who were most important to him or her. Equally relevant and worth noting is the reality that one doesn't need to represent every person in the deceased person's life (or every moment they lived). One significant way to perpetuate healing and hope for mental health stability and solvency is just to show the highlights. The necessity and practicality of the need to arrange the ancestral tribute photos chronologically, starting with baby photos and moving up through the present day punctuates a key healing process to value the lost one's humanity.

The Healing Power of Photos

Equally relevant is an amazing and awesome thread of survival, sanctity and selflessness is often revealed when we've experienced a significant loss because the images and voices of the previous existence of others are more than just snapshots of the past – they can be a powerful tool for helping us grieve, memorializing our family members and friends, and reconnecting us with meaningful moments(1).

In addition, it must be noted that ancestral voices and pictorial images such as photographs, in particular, and moreso video clips. offer an insight and an understanding of the relationship between death and photography, grief, bereavement and mourning. The capacity and opportunity to both capture and conceptualize the presence and significance of a deceased person are inherently linked or intertwined with mortality and memory.

In addition, it is not uncommon that individuals often claim to see death in pictorial images and aligned with voices from the past. Such is often illicit and invigorates a soul searching experience that awakens the human conscious to reflect, resonate and rejuvenate the quest of life and purpose. In a sense, a combative and conciliatory epiphany occurs in every picture sound of human voice. Just as an act of photographing is an attempt to immortalize the subjects and to ensure that they are never forgotten, so it is that both are penetrating and provocative to understand in-depth that ancestral voices and pictorial images expressed give us a real sense and awareness as a base for healing and hope. Because of such, this inevitably will be connected to a memory and an indication of one's absence. In other words, the “ability of a photograph or pictorial image as well as a recorded voice as evidence of one's past existence gives all who would see and hear, the unrepeatable essence of the passed moment once seen and heard and experienced in time past. Simultaneously, a miracle of healing has been initiated because the moment that has been captured, has also been lost. But all is not lost, neither is all forgotten.

Interestingly, some pictorial images or photographs are more blatantly linked with the dead than others. Post-mortem photography, the practice

of photographing family members after they have died, is considered to be the first way to mourn through photography. This practice was very common in the Victorian Era and while it is no longer mainstream, it still occurs in some immigrant and ethnic working-class communities today (Hilliker, 2025)².

It should be articulated that what use to be common is no longer common and yet whatever was effectual healing in the past may also be present today through pathways to healing from that very past. What is not quite commonly known is that post-mortem photographs or images were popular in the 19th century because it was difficult for families to travel and communicate, and these photographs could be shown to relatives or friends at a later date. They played a role in maintaining family bonds over long distances. The photographs served as evidence that these relatives had existed and were also an attempt to keep their memory alive. Family members who took post-mortem photographs treated them as mementos, and some psychologists believe that having this talisman assisted in the bereavement process. Another main reason why photographs were taken of the deceased was due to the lack of advanced technology at the time. Cameras sometimes took hours to produce one photograph, so it was much easier to capture a still corpse than a moving person. As technology improved and more photographs or pictorial images along sided with voice recordings were taken of everyday life, this tradition of post-mortem photography faded from the mainstream.

While the integration of portable amateur cameras into the leisure activities of daily life around 1888 was occurring, photographs were used as a device for remembering or as an aid to memory” (Chimamanda, 2021)⁽³⁾. Pictorial images and photographs and recorded voices from the past often have the capacity to “preserve happy family memories” even if only for a short moment and space in time.

There is a connection and/or intrinsic neurological bond made between photography and memories . And thus this research explored the issue of how can pieces of evidence help or hinder the grieving process and yet for others render the ability to, conjure up memories from the past and help the bereaved to mourn a death:

- In addition, ancestral images (albeit, photographs, paintings, sketches, or recorded videos and voices all can play a part constructively in terms of a way of commemorating the dead and blunting the sharpness of grief. Nevertheless, it is to be understood and even accepted on many levels that the reality of grief, sorrow, mourning and bereavement images can and often are both unsettling and strangely poignant as well as necessary for healing to take place or at least begin.
- Historically or as seen and known in the past, families often posed with the dead, infants appear asleep, and consumptive young ladies elegantly in recline, the disease not only taking their life but increasing their beauty.
- Victorian life was suffused with death. Epidemics such as diphtheria, typhus and cholera scarred the country, and from 1861 the bereavement was deemed fashionable.
- Trinkets of memento mori - literally meaning “remember you must die” - took several forms, and existed long before Victorian times.
- Locks of hair cut from the dead were arranged and worn in locketts and rings, death masks were created in wax, and the images and symbols of death appeared in paintings and sculptures.
- But in the mid-1800s photography was becoming increasingly popular and affordable - leading to memento mori photographic portraiture.

- The first successful form of photography, the daguerreotype - a small, highly detailed picture on polished silver - was an expensive luxury, but not nearly as costly as having a portrait painted, which previously had been the only way of permanently preserving someone’s image.
- As the number of photographers increased, the cost of daguerreotypes fell. Less costly procedures were introduced in the 1850s, such as using thin metal, glass or paper rather than silver.
- Death portraiture became increasingly popular. Victorian nurseries were plagued by measles, diphtheria, scarlet fever, rubella - all of which could be fatal.
- It was often the first time families thought of having a photograph taken - it was the last chance to have a permanent likeness of a beloved child.
- But as healthcare improved the life expectancy of children, the demand for death photography diminished.
- The advent of snapshots sounded the death knell for the art - as most families would have photographs taken in life.
- Now, these images of men, women and children stoically containing their grief in order to preserve the likeness of a taken-too-soon loved one, continue to live up to their name.
- Old voicemails, videos, and answering machine greetings of deceased loved ones can be ongoing sources for sonic memoirs (Bell, 2016).⁽⁴⁾

When people we love pass away, it can feel as if we’ve lost the relationship forever and lost a part of ourselves as well. The explorative and regenerative nature of music allows us to build new memories through collaborative experiences with someone’s voice—connecting us to that person once again.

It is also common for people grieving a loved one to feel stuck—their emotions are out of their control and they have no place to house them. Creating music with a recording of someone who has departed allows people to process these complicated emotions through an expressive medium that offers the freedom to explore. Which quality of the voice jumps out to you that day? What word feels most meaningful in this given moment? The process transforms something from the past into a new, living experience; it gives people the opportunity to collaborate and spend time with people from whom they are otherwise cut off, permanently.

Equally important was the inherent musicality of the voice is undeniable—it has rhythm, pitch, register, tempo (some people speak quickly, some people speak slowly), and of course, is full of the speaker’s unique character. These elements create an abundance of musical inspiration, opening the door, through music, to meaningful and creative relationships long after our loved ones have passed on.

In a touching moment captured on live television, Cindy McCain and Anderson Cooper digress from their discussion of the recent 2020 election after listening to a recording of the late Senator John McCain. They both shared how much they enjoyed hearing the voices of loved ones who have passed on—though Cooper acknowledges how difficult it was for him initially to listen to recordings of his mother’s voice after her death. Based on many conversations with grieving friends and clients, this reaction is very common. Many people end up never listening to or watching these recordings again, out of fear that it will make their loss feel more intense and present once more.

Even more significant is that creating music with a recording of someone who has departed allows people to process these complicated emotions through an expressive medium that offers the freedom to explore processing loss by synthesizing the left and right brain

Current research shows that the grieving brain cues the body and mind to activate the “fight, flight, or freeze” response. Finding ways to synthesize the left and right hemispheres of the brain can allow it to understand the event and learn how to process loss.

Music is flexible, adaptable, and can express a range of thoughts and emotions in real time, integrating these hemispheres. After reflection and musical experimentation with my own “departed” voices, it is possible for people with a diverse range of musical backgrounds to create music with a voice recording of someone who’s passed on.

Using simple music apps that have sound banks and recording capabilities, people can experiment with altering different elements of the recording such as pitch, rhythm, tempo, and word order. They can then create music using electronic processing software, instruments, and their own voices. Clients, colleagues, and friends have created everything from ringtones to simple dialogue to full musical pieces, crafting a musical conversation by mingling their own inspiration and creativity with the voice of their loved ones.

These creative processes can be ongoing—a recording can be revisited, and new pieces created, depending on how one feels about the relationship at any given point in one’s life. The voices of loved ones stay with us long after our loved ones have passed on. They’re on voicemail recordings we’ve saved, videos we forgot were on our phone, and answering machine greetings we choose not to delete. And of course, they are forever imprinted in our memories.

In recent years, the nature and impact of images and recordings and their relationship with grief has yield insightful perspectives and findings. In a recent study, done before the pandemic by Amerispeak and WebMD, found that 57% of Americans are grieving the loss of someone close to them over the last three years. That means every other person you see is grieving — because grief never really goes away. (5)

And that was what our world looked like in the Summer of 2019. Since then as late as 2025, numerous grief losses have increased astronomically. Even more telling is the reality that everyone’s personal grief journey is often diverse, different, delicate and distinctly different yet collectively very similar on many fronts.

Arguably, it would be important to point out that for grief, loss, and mourning is different for every person, pet, or deep connection you lose. The complexities and complications of grief and loss are intertwined with ambiguity. For most people, there is no end date. For others, there may very well be no specific stage one should be at. All there is how one may feel, how one may grieve as time passes, and how one actually cope with the loss. And in the coping phase, as much as therapists, friends and family can be incredibly helpful, the use of pictorial images and ancestral voices offer an added value of reality, reflection, restoration and remembrance in untold fashion and fever. Of course, they can also be unintentional, and accidentally be incredibly unhelpful as well.

This study, which surveyed more than 1,000 Americans, reveals how those who have recently grieved the death of a child, spouse, a close friend, a close family member, or a pet, have felt about that loss in relation to how their friends and family supported them (or didn’t).

For all of us in this moment in history together, these insights can help us understand what we can do to help those we love with some of life’s most difficult experiences and emotions, even from afar.

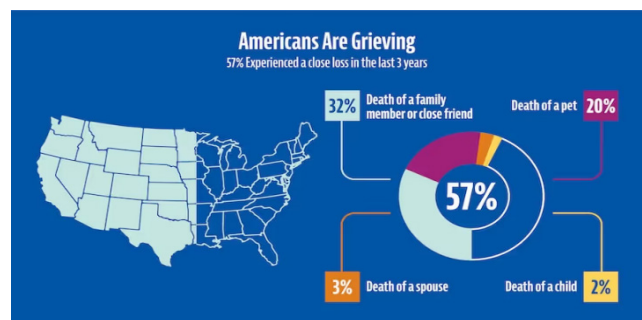
Moreover, there is a underlying reality in that a majority of Americans are grieving in some shape, form or capacity.

The old adage that you don’t know what it’s like in someone’s shoes unless you’ve walked a mile in them is true. More than 57% of Americans reported experiencing a major loss over the last three years.

In all, 32% experienced the loss of a family member or close friend, 20% experienced the death of a pet, 3% expired the loss of a spouse or partner, and 2% experienced the loss of a child.

Within that, 45% of the deaths were anticipated, 45% were not anticipated, and another 8% were anticipated as the result of a violent circumstance.

Truly, the majority of Americans are dealing with some sort of pain and complicated grief at all times. Keep that in mind as you move through your day — in traffic, at the grocery store, on your evening jog. A little kindness can go a long way to help make someone’s day a little bit brighter.



The data:

- 32% of people have experienced the death of a family member or close friend
- 20% have experienced the death of a pet
- 3% death of spouse
- 2% death of child

First Year is the Hardest, but Grief Doesn’t End There

While there is no preset or determined grief timeline because everyone’s grief journey is different, survey respondents said that the most intense emotions and grieving were in the first year after the loss.

That makes sense. Life changes, and every single event is a new experience without that loved one: the holidays, the birthdays, the anniversaries.

But grief doesn’t end there.

Plenty of Americans report they are still intensely grieving at the 3 year mark.

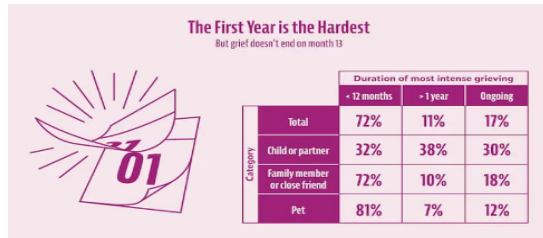
This is especially true for those who have lost a child or partner (38% are still intensely grieving).

Again, this makes sense. Every life event and milestone, any good news or any bad news, all of it is a moment their loved one isn’t experiencing with them.

For friends and families of those grieving, be cognizant of this.

- Reach out — over text, email, a call, anything (but maybe not social, and you’ll see why soon!) — and let them know you are thinking of them.

- Talk about their loved one. Say their name.
- Recall specific details about them — especially if it was something only you and that person shared. Learning new information about what someone you love said, or thoughts, or did can be healing.



The data:

Most intense grieving (total):

- Less than 12 months 71%
- More than 1 year 11%
- Still intensely grieving 17%

Child/partner most intense grieving:

- Less than 12 months 32%
- More than 1 year 38%
- Still intensely grieving 30%

Family/close friend most intense grieving:

- Less than 12 months 72%
- More than 1 year 10%
- Still intensely grieving 17%

Pet most intense grieving:

- Less than 12 months 81%
- More than 1 year 7%
- Still intensely grieving 12%

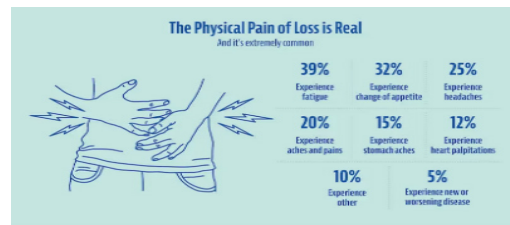
Grief Can Lead to Physical Pain

There are real, physical symptoms and side effects that come with intense grief: 65% of Americans those going through intense grieving experience some sort of physical ailment, or a combination of multiple ones.

You can see below how it breaks down overall. As a friend or family member trying to help, understand that these physical ailments are real, and side effects of mental health symptoms associated with their intense grief.

Be there for them. Sit with them. Do exactly what you would to aide anyone else experiencing these pains. Whatever you do, do not dismiss them.

This is an incredibly important, and painful, part of life. Potentially even help them find health care providers that may be able to help lessen the physical pain and as they better sort through the mental hurdles.



The data:

- 39% experience fatigue
- 32% change of appetite
- 25% headaches
- 20% aches and pain
- 15% stomachaches
- 12% heart palpitations
- 5% new diagnosis or worsening disease, cancer, blood pressure
- Other 10%

Grief Can Affect Your Mental Health

These physical ailments are likely due to mental symptoms associated with the pain of the loss of a close connection.

As a friend or family member, keep an eye out for anything on the suicidal thought spectrum. It isn't unheard of for those experience deep grief to go in that direction. If that happens, seek help.

The other symptoms are serious, as well, and require your empathy, your ear if they want to talk, and likely just your silence as you sit together in the suck of the loss.



The data:

- 83% experienced sadness
- 42% experienced depression
- 31% inability to sleep / sleep disturbances
- 29% anger
- 19% anxiety, including PTSD
- 5% suicidal thoughts
- Other 2%

Negative Feedback Loops

Many folks experiencing intense grief and mourning get stuck in a loop of negative thoughts and feedback. Isolation, self-blame, and a feeling of a lack of purpose tend to increase the closer a connection is to you.

These negative loops are recognized by those who are in them, given that so many continue to grieve intensely three years later. But, they are incredibly difficult cycles to break.

As a friend or family member, one of the best things you can do is to listen intensely, even if it gets repetitive, and kindly point out where the thinking might not be accurate. If it is accurate, let it sit. Let it be. The situation sucks. That's all you have to say.

Sometimes new experiences in which those grieving can look forward to something that has to do with their passed loved one can help.

For instance, memorial diamonds — which take 7-11 months to create, through which loved ones get updates about the process throughout — or legacy project — which people create and share to keep the memory of their loved one and their legacy alive — can be extremely helpful to break negative cycles.



The data:

- 41% intense sorrow, pain, thoughts and feelings of loss
- 27% problems accepting the loss
- 18% guilt or self blame
- 16% lack of trust in others, isolating from others and withdrawal from social activities
- 22% numbness or detachment
- 20% trouble carrying out normal routines
- 15% bitterness about the loss
- 17% excessive avoidance of reminders of the loss
- 12% feeling your life hold no meaning or purpose
- 15% intense and persistent lingering for the deceased
- Other 8%

More Time with Friends and Family is the #1 Coping Strategy

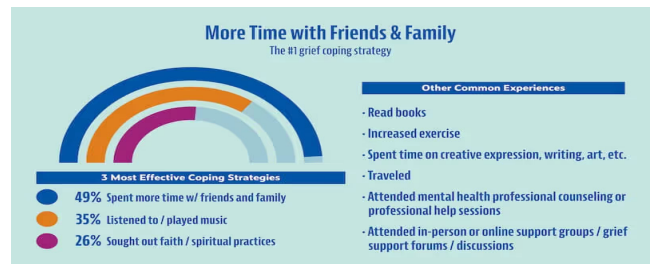
Almost a full 50% of those grieving intensely say spending more time with friends and family is extremely helpful. Loss seems to bring along a power to form a family of all types to offer support, whether it be friends, neighbors, or co-workers.

Yes, there may be periods of isolation, or outbursts of anger, but by-and-large, those grieving want to spend time around those who knew and loved their loved one, too.

Music, faith, books, exercise, and creative expression rank high as coping mechanisms as well.

A good idea is to use your time together to listen to music, practice a religious or spiritual ritual, recommended books or talk about the advice in them, exercise together, or create something together — like a painting, or a dance, or a journal practice.

Read about this deep father-son relationship and get a glimpse of the power of vulnerability in strengthening family ties.



The data:

- 49% spent more time w/ friends and family
- 35% listened to / played music
- 26% sought out faith / spiritual practices
- 16% read books
- 14% increased exercise
- 16% spent time on creative expression, writing, art, etc.
- 9% traveled
- 5% saw a mental health professional, a grief counselor or sought out professional help sessions
- 5% attended in-person or online support groups / grief support forums / discussions
- 9% other

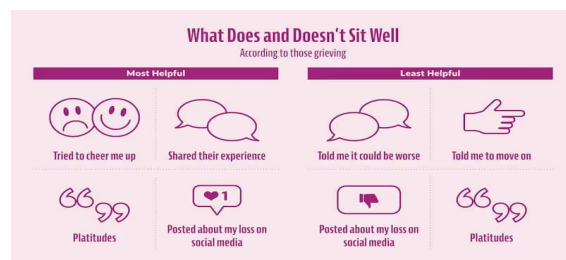
How to Help Someone Through Grief

Platitudes are known to not be the best way to make someone feel better. But it turns out, they are far from the worst. Trying to cheer someone up through effort like a group activity, sharing memories, or even just showing effort in general through your presence is the best way to help.

The worst way? Telling someone they should have already moved on, or offering unsolicited advice.

Also, do what you can to keep your own stories of loss tucked in close, at least for a little while. For many, they can help. But for many, they can make the situation worse. Gauge the person you love before going down that path.

As the support system, you are an incredibly important part of a new daily routine or daily activities, and your friend or loved one's future well-being.



The data:

The Most Helpful:

- 51% tried to cheer me up
- 44% shared their own experience
- 29% platitudes
- 12% when they posted about my loss on their social
- 9% unsolicited advice
- 9% told me I needed need to move on / seek closure
- 7% it could be worse

The Least Helpful:

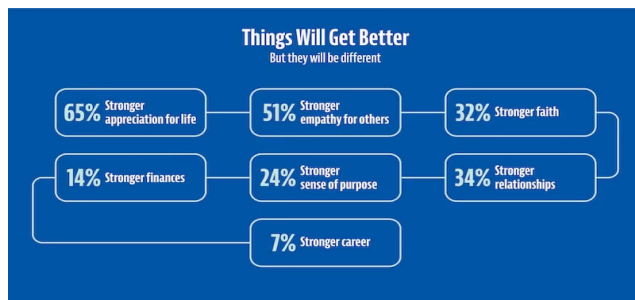
- 22% told me it could be worse
- 19% told me I needed to move on / seek closure
- 11% when they posted about my loss on their social
- 10% platitudes
- 6% shared their own experience with loss
- 6% tried to cheer me up

Living with Grief

More than half of residents said that 3 years after the loss, they are more appreciative of life (65%) and have more empathy for others (51%).

Relationships, faith, purpose, finances, and career can all take hits throughout those three years, but for many, they come full circle and begin to feel even stronger than before.

Time doesn't heal all wounds. But it does make for new normals, and that comes with both the bitter and with the sweet.

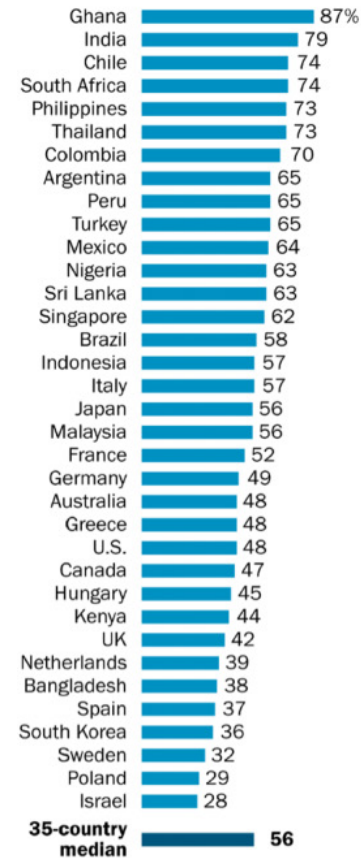
**The data:**

- 65% stronger appreciation of life
- 51% stronger empathy for others
- 32% stronger relationships
- 34% stronger faith
- 24% stronger sense of purpose
- 14% stronger finances
- 7% stronger career

What is even more compelling is majorities of adults in most countries around the world say that animals can have spirits or spiritual energies. This includes 83% of adults in India, which has a Hindu majority. It also includes 81% in Muslim-majority Turkey, 76% in Christian-majority Argentina and 70% in Israel, the world's only country with a Jewish majority.

A median of 56% across the countries surveyed believe in spirits in nature

% who say parts of nature, like mountains, rivers or trees, can have spirits or spiritual energies



Note: Tunisia was among the 36 countries surveyed, but this question was not asked there.

Source: Spring 2024 Global Attitudes Survey. Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 31-Aug. 6, 2023.

"Believing in Spirits and Life After Death Is Common Around the World"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Many people around the world also believe that parts of nature (such as mountains, rivers or trees) can have spirits or spiritual energies. This belief is voiced by nearly three-quarters of adults in Christian-majority Chile (74%) and Buddhist-majority Thailand (73%), and by 57% in Muslim-majority Indonesia.

The U.S. falls somewhere in the middle of the countries surveyed on these questions: 57% of U.S. adults believe that animals can have spirits, while 48% say the same about mountains, rivers or trees. (Around six-in-ten U.S. adults identify as Christian, and about three-in-ten are religiously unaffiliated.)

In general, people around the world are much less likely to say that certain objects (such as crystals, jewels or stones) can have spiritual energies.

In some countries where large segments of the population do not identify with *any* religion, belief in spiritual forces nevertheless is fairly common. In Japan, for example, 53% of adults say that animals can have spirits, and 56% say that parts of nature can have spiritual energies – even though more than half of Japanese adults are religiously unaffiliated (6)

The bottom line is that grieving is not a “one size fits all” experience -- either in what people grieve for or how they experience it. And inasmuch as we may think of grief only in terms of death, a deep sense of loss comes in response to many more events, respondents said:

- Nearly one-third (31%) had faced serious illness -- their own or a family member's.
- About another third (32%) had gone through the death of a family member or close friend, and almost as many mourned a lost friendship or relationship (29%).
- Twenty percent were recovering from the death of a pet.
- Smaller proportions grieved for divorce or lost jobs, homes, or possessions, among other things.

“What’s surprising is that we don’t recognize all the different aspects of grief more. And when we don’t, people feel they’re not allowed to grieve. It does a disservice to their recovery.”

The duration of intense grieving varied among those who took the survey, depending on what people had lost. Nearly half of all people (48%) said their most powerful feelings subsided within the first 6 months, and two-thirds (67%) had recovered within 1 year. Pet owners were the most likely to recover quickly. Sixty-six percent of those who lost a pet said their intense grief lasted less than 6 months, compared to 48% of people who lost a close family member or friend to death and 45% who mourned the loss of a friendship/relationship.

Expectations vs. Reality

Grieving is a very personal process, but it can be hard to ignore the expectations of others -- and people often expect mourners to return to regular life before they’re ready.

More than half of all participants (53%) said that they’d encountered people whose sympathy seemed to have an expiration date. Of that subgroup:

- 58% of the people who were pressured said they felt expected to recover within the first 3 months. A whopping 81% of those mourning a pet, and 75% of those who’d lost a friendship or went through a breakup, said the same.
- Even for those mourning the death of a close relative or friend, most (91%) felt expected to move on within 1 year.

Mental and Physical Effects of Grief

Nearly all (88%) had some type of emotional symptom while grieving, and two-thirds (68%) had physical symptoms. “Life is a process of accumulating losses.”

Just as people needed different amounts of time to recover from their grief, the symptoms they reported varied. Sadness (76%) and depression (43%) were the two main emotions they say they had, while fatigue (59%) and change of appetite (48%) affected the most people physically. But here, too, the symptoms varied, depending on the loss:

- Death -- of either a close relative or friend (84%) or a pet (81%) -- was more likely to result in sadness.
- Those who’d lost a friendship or romantic relationship were more likely to have depression (53%) and anger (48%).

- Nearly half of those mourning a serious illness (47%) reported a hard time sleeping, considerably more than the next largest group: people who’d experienced a close death (33%).

It makes sense that grief can lead to such varied experiences, says Schuurman.

“Life is a process of accumulating losses. How we integrate or ignore, process or push away those losses -- of everything: jobs, friendships, relationships, health, things that matter to us -- starts to become patterns,” she says. “It shapes how we look at the world, who we become, how we’re able to show up for other people.”

The Lingering Pain of Lost Friendships and Relationships

The loss of a friendship or a breakup seems to pose particular challenges. Relationships end for complicated reasons, and social media makes it easy to see how the friend has gone on without you.

Lost friendship i...Those who mourned lost relationships were the most likely to have extended grief, with 20% saying it had lasted more than a year.

- Emotionally, this group was more likely to have depression (53%) and anger (48%) than any other group.
- They were also likely to have changes in appetite (54%) and more likely to have stomachaches (41%).
- And after the loss, they were more likely to have social fallout like lack of trust or isolation (53%), bitterness (41%), and self-blame (36%).
- Sixty-percent of people reported they felt expectations from people to get over their grief. The majority (75%) of them felt they had up to 3 months to move on.

“I think it’s because there isn’t the same kind of finality. With loss of friendship, that person’s still out there. It can be hard to reconcile the idea you’ll never talk to them again,” says Smith. “Also, because the grief isn’t as recognized, it’s not dealt with. And when it’s not dealt with, it sticks around longer.”

Coping Mechanisms, Good and Bad

In response to the life-changing event, most participants said they came up with some strategy to deal with their grief -- only 14% said otherwise. The most common tactic: spending more time with friends and family. Forty-four percent of all participants turned to other people for help.

But again, when you consider the individual types of loss, the picture changes:

- After the death of a loved one, people were more likely to spend more time with others (53%). They were also the group most likely to turn to religion or spiritual practices (31%).
- Both those dealing with a serious illness (50%) and those who lost a relationship (58%) found music to be a comfort.
- People who’d lost a pet were least likely to seek any kind of help, with 21% saying they muddled through on their own. Among those who did have coping mechanisms, they were more likely (37%) to focus on work to get over their loss.

“When you’re grieving death, it’s helpful to connect with others, because they’re either grieving themselves or can support you,” says Smith. “But lost friendship is a grief not a lot of people understand, which is why you’d turn towards more self-soothing exercises like music.”

Not all coping mechanisms were positive, though. Half of all participants (51%) engaged in some kind of behavior that can be harmful.

“When we look at all the micro-losses we have as people, from childhood up through your life, it’s not an understatement to say that unaddressed losses are directly responsible for a lot of the problems we get ourselves into,” says Schuurman. “We turn to things like substance misuse, rash relationships we know aren’t healthy, and other numbing behaviors.”

- Many experienced a change in their eating -- 38% overate, while 23% didn’t eat enough. Isolation affected 47% of participants.
- Other common negative behaviors include drinking too much alcohol (26%) and excessive spending (23%).
- Those dealing with a serious illness were most likely to indulge in negative behaviors (67%).
- Among those grieving a friendship, self-medicating or over-indulging with food or alcohol were the most common activities, with 42% doing each.

Effective Ways to Help Someone Who’s Grieving

When someone you know is grieving, it can be hard to know what to say -- and how it is interpreted. Not surprisingly, according to the participants, some approaches are more helpful than others. However, at best, only half will say any of these approaches are helpful.

- Most participants (76%) said someone had tried to cheer them up -- and most of the time (54%), it worked. But, many others (36%) said it was ineffective.
- Sharing your own experience with loss had a similar effect: 74% said someone had done that, and 53% felt better afterward. However, 37% said it was ineffective.
- The survey also uncovered some approaches that often do more harm than good.
- Saying, “It could be worse” made people feel worse almost three times as often as it helped (46% to 16%).
- Recommending that the mourner move on or seek closure had a similar effect, with 42% saying it made things worse and 16% saying it improved the situation.
- Unsolicited advice also had a tendency to make things worse, with 33% saying it hurt and 19% saying it helped (7).

Furthermore, an added challenge in this research investigation is the notion of posthumous harm over time. The question what is and when is death, affects how we understand the possibility of posthumous harm and redemption. While it is impossible to hurt the dead, it is possible to harm the wishes, beliefs and memories of persons that once lived. In this way, this book highlights the vulnerability of the dead, and makes connections to a historical oeuvre, to add critical value to similar concepts in history that are overlooked by most philosophers. There is a long historical view of case studies that illustrate the conceptual character of posthumous punishment; that is, dissection and gibbeting of the criminal corpse after the Murder Act (1752), and those shot at dawn during the First World War. A long historical view is also taken of posthumous harm; that is, body-snatching in the late Georgian period, and organ-snatching at Alder Hey in the 1990s.(7)

In remembrance of those loved and lost, past and present, famous and not so famous, we all die. Death is eminent. Yet, it is important to recall that portrayals of death and the dead are everywhere within popular culture revealing much about contemporary society and how it engages with mortality. Not all are able to handle death and dying.

Numerous hopes and dreams are shattered beyond recovery because those we idolized and admired have somehow died and we will never see or know him directly in this lifetime. Beyond the shadows of their lives respectively, lies tragedy, compromise, loss, shame, doubt and victory in many capacities. Many of them have had it all and lost it all. Many have had it and wouldn’t share it. Many couldn’t handle what life had to offer and the lives they lived reflect the agonies of defeat, disappointment, depression and dissolution even among the rich and famous. Likewise are such realities and findings apparent among the common man in every day life. Death, dying and grieving are represent in many facets much to liking and our disliking. We have to deal with and/or get over it.(8)

In essence, data collections and analyses cross comparatively convey to us that coping, recovery, and healing in the face and fabric of grief however expressed yields a provocative reality for those who seek stability, sanity and a sense of solitude.

Coping with loss doesn’t happen in grief stages like so many people might think. Instead, it happens over time, as each holiday goes by, as a new normal sets in.

Friends and family, though, have an incredibly important role to play. But even moreso is the utilization and in impotence of pictorial images and recorded ancestral voices as meaningful aids of support and assistance in processing grief, loss, sorrow, mourning and bereavement. Such emeshed inextricably saturated with family, friends and professional therapeutic services and resources offer a chilling and compelling approach to effectuate healing, help and hope to those grieving intensely have, and how they respond to the grieving in terms of what they say and do and don’t do.

For most people, the research findings indicate the grieving process and experiences the use of pictorial images and ancestral voices don’t have to be meticulously methodical and surgically precise in approach or application. Such could be awkward but one thing is indisputable, the use of pictorial images and recorded ancestral voices within themselves offer a journey that has to feel and express what is right, honest, and helpful.

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