

Grief To Growth



A Student Guide

Practical Steps and Support to Help You Heal.

2025 Edition



CAL POLY

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A Personal Message

Grief is a deeply personal journey, and navigating it during college can feel overwhelming. This guide was created by students who have experienced loss and is here to offer support, tools, and encouragement as you navigate your own grief journey.

Grief can feel incredibly isolating, especially while trying to keep up with everything college asks of you. You might be carrying a lot that others can't see. If that's true for you right now, we want you to know you are not alone.

Whether your loss is recent or something you're still processing, your experience is valid. Grief can impact your focus, energy, relationships, and sense of self. There's no timeline, and there's no right way to grieve.

This is not a handbook for "getting over it." It is a companion for moving through it at your own pace and in your own way. Grief doesn't come with instructions, but you don't have to figure it out by yourself.

You don't have to read this in order or finish it in one sitting. Flip to a section that speaks to where you are right now. Keep it nearby or return to it later. Let this be a resource that moves with you.

This guide reflects the voices of students who have navigated grief while attending Cal Poly. It was shaped by personal experiences and built with the hope that it gives you something we once needed: a reminder that you don't have to carry this alone.



Understanding Your Grief

What is Grief?

Grief is the emotional response to losing someone who mattered to you. It can show up in many ways such as sadness, anger, numbness, confusion, fear, or even relief. Some days you might feel everything. Other days, you might feel nothing at all. Both are okay.

There's no timeline, no checklist, and no "right" way to grieve. Your experience is valid just as is.

Grief vs. Mourning

Grief happens inside you. Mourning is how you let that grief out. Think of mourning as the expression of your internal grief.

It might look like:

- A mixed of intense emotions.
- Talking about your loved one.
- Journaling or spending time reflecting on memories.
- Looking at photos.
- Making a playlist of songs that remind you of the person you are grieving.

Mourning matters.

It's how you begin to heal. Grief kept inside can feel isolating and heavy, but when we allow ourselves to mourn, we create space for comfort, connection, and transformation.

The Six Needs of Mourning

(Based on Dr. Alan Wolfelt's framework)

1. **Acknowledge the reality of the death.**
2. **Embrace the pain of the loss.**
3. **Remember the person who died.**
4. **Develop a new self-identity.**
5. **Identify the meaning of you loss.**
6. **Receive ongoing support from others.**

Your process may not follow these steps in order.

What's important is moving through these needs in your own time, at your own pace.



**Learn more about
the 6 Needs**

Understanding Your Grief

Navigating Grief as a Young Adult

Losing someone while juggling school, work, and life is overwhelming. Grief can disrupt everything: your emotions, your body, and your relationships.



You might feel:

- Regret or guilt.
- Anger at family, friends, or even the person who died.
- Resentment that your life has changed.
- Anger or a deep sadness that they cannot be present for achievements.
- Pressure to take on a new role in the family.

You might experience:

- Fatigue, restlessness, anxiety, or irritability.
- Trouble sleeping or concentrating.
- Memory slips or lack of appetite.
- Physical symptoms like headaches or frequent colds.

Grief comes in waves.

One moment you're okay; the next, you're overwhelmed.

Grief changes relationships. Some people show up for you and others may disappear. Both can be painful. Focus on those who makes space for your grief.

Most of all: be patient with yourself. Healing is not a straight line and does not always make sense.

Trusting Your Own Grief Response

Everyone has an opinion about grief - how long it should last, what it should look like, or what you "should" be doing by now.

But no one else is living your loss the way you are. You're allowed to tune out other people's input and focus on how you are actually feeling.

Take the time to notice your own reactions. Understanding what you need starts with listening to yourself.



When Grief Affects School

Grief can quietly affect every part of your academic life. If you're finding it harder to keep up with school by missing classes, losing focus, or falling behind, you're not alone. This doesn't mean you're failing. It means you're carrying something heavy and it's okay to ask for support.

It's Hard to Focus When You're Grieving

Grief doesn't pause for classes, deadlines, or group projects. It can affect your ability to:

- Get out of bed and attend class
- Concentrate on lectures or assignments
- Stay motivated to complete work
- Engage in discussions or group work
- Turn things in on time, or at all

This is not laziness, it's emotional exhaustion.

Grief-Sensitive Academic Planning Tips

When you're overwhelmed, small changes can make a big difference. Here are ways to protect your academic path while honoring what you're going through:



Don't Wait to Check Deadlines

If your grief becomes unmanageable, ignoring school responsibilities may create larger issues down the road.

Take a moment to:

- Review your drop, withdrawal, or Incomplete deadlines in your student portal
- Consider a reduced course load or academic pause, if needed
- Ask for support early. Your future self will thank you for it



01 TALK TO YOUR PROFESSOR.

You don't need to share everything. A simple "I've experienced a loss and I'm struggling to keep up" is enough to start a conversation.

02 ASK FOR EXTENSIONS OR FLEXIBILITY.

Most professors and departments want to help, especially if you reach out early.

03 SPEAK WITH YOUR ADVISOR OR THE DEAN OF STUDENTS.

They can help you explore options like reduced units, incompletes, or a temporary leave.

04 USE CAMPUS RESOURCES

CAPS, the Academic Skills Center, and Disability Resource Center can all support you during and after grief.

Academic Support

When to Ask for Accommodations

If grief is making it hard to stay on top of your classes, you should ask for support. Whether it's extensions, attendance flexibility, or a reduced course load, there are people on campus who can help you adjust your academic plan without penalty.

This page walks you through who to contact and how to start.

Step-by-Step: Requesting Academic Support

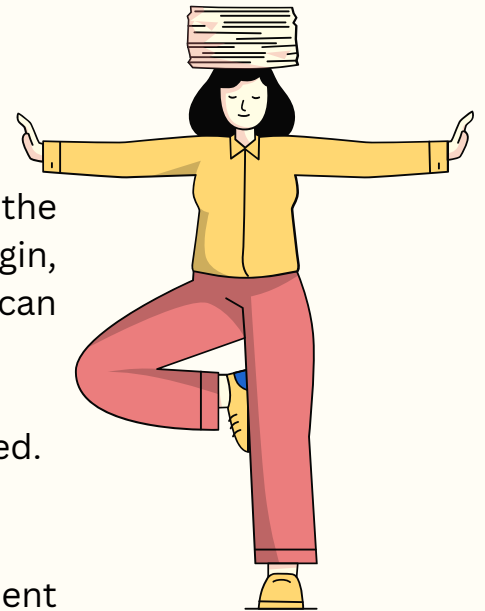
Step One: Reach out to someone you trust

Start by emailing your professor, academic advisor, or the Dean of Student's office. If you don't know where to begin, the Dean of Student's Office is a good first stop as you can request for them to email the professors on your behalf.

Use the email templates on page 10 to help you get started.

Step Two: Let them know what you're experiencing

You don't have to share all the details. A simple statement like "I've experienced a significant loss and it's affecting my ability to complete coursework" is enough.



Step Three: Ask about your options

Depending on your situation, you might request:

- Deadline extensions
- Attendance flexibility
- Incomplete
- A reduced course load
- Excused assignments
- Temporary academic leave
- Pass/No Pass grading (when available)



It's okay to let your professors know that you're stepping back for now and will reach out again by a certain date to make a plan. **You don't need to solve everything right away.**

Academic Support

Step Four: Follow through with support staff

Once you connect with a professor or advisor, they may refer you to the Dean of Students, CAPS, or the Disability Resource Center (DRC). These offices can help you.



Optional Additional Steps

Step Five: Document what you've requested (if possible)

Keep copies of your emails and any replies in an easy to access space. This can help you stay organized if you need to follow up or reference agreements later on.

Step Six: Follow up if you don't hear back

Professors and staff are busy, and sometimes emails get lost. If you don't receive a response after a day or two, it's okay to send a follow-up message.

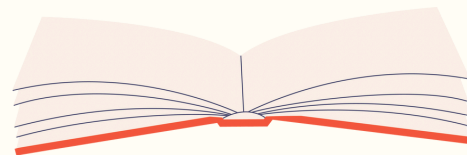
Check the email templates on page 10 for assistance.

Step Seven: Ask about retroactive options

If your grief caused you to completely step away without connecting with your professors first, or if you are worried you waited too long, don't panic.

You can still ask about:

- Retroactive Incompletes
- Late drops or withdrawals
- Emergency academic relief
- Excused absences



These may require Dean or DRC involvement, but they are possible.

Step Eight: Schedule a check-in

Once you've set up an accommodation or plan, ask if you can check in again after a week or two. This gives you space to adjust, while showing your commitment to continuing your education.

Communication Guide

When you're grieving, even simple tasks like writing an email can feel overwhelming. You might not know what to say, how much to share, or where to start. **This section is here to make things easier.**

Below, you'll find ready-to-use email templates for reaching out to professors, advisors, supervisors, or campus staff. Whether you need flexibility, support, or just space to breathe, these templates can help you ask for what you need. **Feel free to copy, edit, or adjust them in a way that feels right to you.**

[Email Templates](#)

Initial Contact with Faculty

- Use this template to inform faculty of a recent loss and to request space or support.

Reaching Out to the Dean of Students

- Use this template to notify the Dean of Students of your loss. The Dean can help coordinate accommodations and communicate with professors and staff on your behalf.

Informing Faculty About Significant Anniversary Dates

- Use this template to share the dates of significant anniversaries, birthdays, or holidays related to your loss, so faculty are aware these may be challenging times for you.

Requesting a Mental Health Day

- Use this template to ask for a day off to focus on your mental health and well-being.
 - **Version 1:** The recipient is already aware of the loss.
 - **Version 2:** The recipient is unaware of the loss.

Returning to Class

- Use this template to inform faculty that you will be returning to class after an experience of grief/loss.

Caretaking

- Use this template to let any faculty know that you are a caretaker or help with caretaking and that this responsibility may interfere with academics.
 - **Version 1:** Ongoing Caretaking Locally/At-Home
 - **Version 2:** Long Distance Caretaking/Commuting

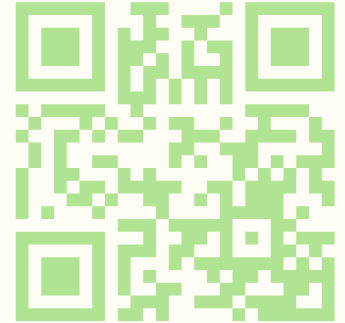
Anticipating a Loss

- Use this template if you are anticipating the loss of a loved one and want to inform faculty in advance that your academic performance or attendance may be affected.

Cal Poly Health Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

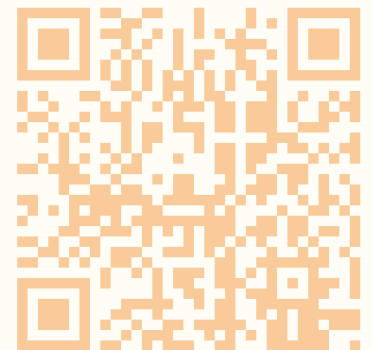
- Schedule an appointment: 805-756-2511
- **Let's Talk:** A messaging hub for support
- Individual Therapy
- Grief Group (TBD)
 - Becca Gillis (rgillis@calpoly.edu)
 - Johnneen Manno (jmannove@calpoly.edu)
- **Mental Health Webinar**
 - Loss, Grieving, and Mourning
([Watch|Slides](#))



Scan here to visit CAPS

Dean of Students

- Contact the Dean of Students for additional resources and outreach support.
- **Email:** deanofstudents@calpoly.edu
- Professors may also reach out directly to request guidance on how to support a student in need.



Scan here to learn more about the Dean of Students

SLO Community Support

Hospice of San Luis Obispo (SLO)

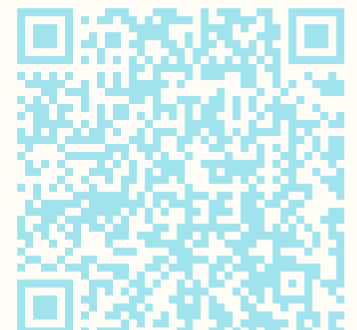
- Offers support groups for individuals who have lost a loved one. Open to everyone, regardless of how much time has passed since the loss.

Contact: 805-544-2266

County of San Luis Obispo Behavioral Health

Provides grief support groups for residents in need.

Contact: 1-800-838-1381



Scan here to visit the Hospice Grief Support Schedule

What to Expect During Grief Therapy

Thinking About Seeking Out Counseling? Here's What to Expect!

Starting grief counseling can feel intimidating, but it is also a great tool to step towards healing. You don't need to have it all figured out, and you definitely don't need to be in crisis to reach out.

Whether your grief is fresh, messy, or something you've been carrying quietly for a long time, therapy can offer a space just for you.

What to Expect in a Grief Counseling Session

- **Warm welcome:** Your first session will include some basics like introductions, getting to know your counselor, and sharing why you reached out.
- **Sharing your story:** You'll be invited to talk about your loss at your own pace.
- **Naming your emotions:** A therapist can help you identify feelings you might not have words for yet.
- **Tools and support:** You may learn ways to cope with difficult days, through methods such as grounding or reactive techniques.

It's okay to feel nervous. You don't have to know exactly what to say. Therapists are there to guide conversations gently, especially when words are hard to find.



Common Fears About Therapy:

“What if I cry?” That's okay. Crying is a sign that you are in the right place.

“What if I don't know what to talk about?” Just showing up is enough, and you can talk about anything you want.

“What if it feels awkward?” It might at first, but that's normal. You are meeting someone new so you may feel uncertain, but as the conversation progresses, you will feel more comfortable.

A few reminders:

- Therapy is confidential. What you say stays private.
- You don't have to commit forever. Start with one session and see how it feels.

How to Get Started

Reaching out for support can feel like an impossible step, but the process is simpler than you might think. You don't need to be in crisis, have the perfect words, or even be sure what you're looking for.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, heavy, or stuck, a counselor can help you sort through it at your pace.

Getting Started Is Easy:

- You can schedule an appointment by calling the campus counseling center directly.
- Not sure how to start the call? All you have to say is, "I'm a student looking to schedule a counseling appointment."
- When you call, you may be asked to provide some personal information (name, email, etc.) and a few questions about what's bringing you in.
- Every therapist has an info page and short bio available online so you can read about them and find someone who feels like the right fit.
- The counseling center is conveniently located in the Campus Health Center. To check in, just go to the front desk and speak with any employee.

Whether you meet in person or virtually, therapy can offer a consistent space to sort through your feelings and help you begin to process your grief.



Scan here to visit
the CP Campus
Health Center.



Scan here to visit
the CP Counseling
Services Center.



Scan here to visit
the CP Counseling
staff page.

Individual and Group Therapy:

Individual: A one-on-one space where you talk about anything you're going through. It's a space that's yours, where you can be honest without judgment and move at your own pace.

Group: A space where you connect with others who are going through something similar. You'll listen and share (if you want to). Group sessions are guided and move at a pace that respects everyone's comfort.

Tools for Friends & Family

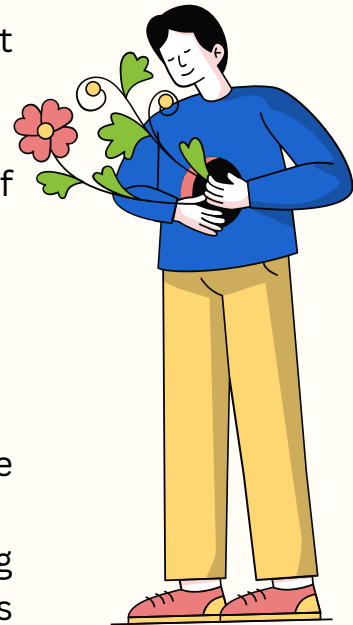
Grieving individuals often feel isolated, and it can be difficult for friends and family to know what to say or do. If someone you care about is grieving, you don't need to have the perfect words, just showing up with care can make a huge difference.

Here are some ways to support a grieving roommate, friend, or peer in a meaningful way:

Starting the Conversation

Sometimes it's challenging to reach out. Here are some tips on what you might say:

- "Thinking of you, please reach out when you need anything at all."
- "You don't need to respond, but I wanted to let you know I'm here if you need me."



Understanding the Grieving Process

- There is no set timeline.
- Avoid pressuring them to "move on".
- Recognize people grieve in different ways, some talk and some don't.
- Recognize that grief can bring up a range of emotions, including sadness, anger, happiness, laughter, relief, guilt, and fear. All of it is normal.

Being Present and Listening

- Checking in regularly, even if they don't always respond.
- Acknowledge their loss and its impact.
- Offering to sit with them, grab food, or just hang out quietly.
- It's okay if you don't have the perfect words, instead just listen without judgment.

Spending Time Together

- Grabbing lunch, going for a walk, or watching a movie together.
- Doing something lowkey and creative like coloring, playing a game, or working on a puzzle.
- Just sitting in the same space while doing homework or listening to music.

Offering Practical Assistance

- Run errands like grocery shopping.
- Drop off or order food to their home.
- Help with housework like cleaning or laundry.
- Offer rides if needed.

Keeping the Support Going

- Reach out on harder days like birthdays, holidays, or anniversaries.
- Mark important dates in your calendar so you remember to check in next month or next year.
- Respect when they need space.

Grief Milestones

1 Month

What You Might Feel: Shock, numbness, disbelief, exhaustion

Journal Prompts:

- What do I miss the most about them right now?
- What's one small moment I want to remember forever?
- How have my days changed since the loss?

3 Months

What You Might Feel: Reality setting in, sadness, loneliness, searching for support

Journal Prompts:

- How has my grief shown up in my daily life?
- Who has shown up for me? How do I want to be supported?
- What does self-care look like for me today?

First Birthday Without Them

What You Might Feel: Deep longing, reflection, a mix of gratitude and sorrow

Journal Prompts:

- What are my favorite memories of their past birthdays?
- How can I honor their memory today in a way that feels right for me?
- If I could talk to them today, what would I say?

First Anniversary of the Passing

What You Might Feel: Emotional buildup, pressure to “feel better,” sadness while reflecting on what they have missed

Journal Prompts:

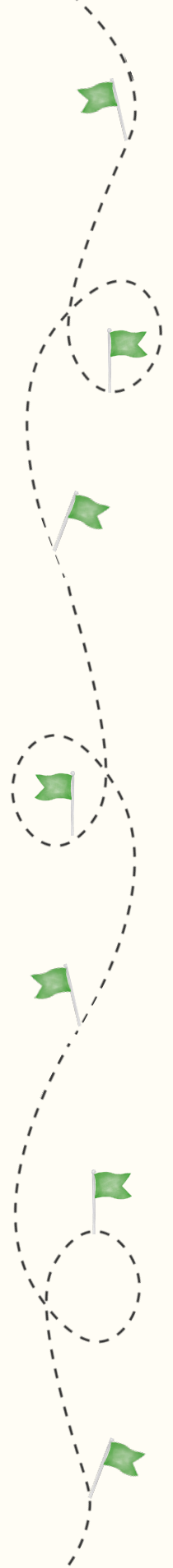
- How have I changed in the past year?
- What has surprised me about grief?
- What do I want to carry forward from their life or legacy?

First Holidays

What You Might Feel: Emptiness, nostalgia, anxiety about a tradition, desire for connection or how it used to be

Journal Prompts:

- What holiday traditions do I miss with them?
- What new traditions (if any) could bring me peace?
- Who can I talk to about how I'm feeling this season?



Grieving While Sharing Space

Navigating Grief Around Roommates & Peers

Living with others while grieving can feel like walking through two worlds at once. You may need quiet, rest, or time alone while your roommates may be moving at a completely different pace.

Explaining Your Grief to the People You Live With:

You don't have to share all the details, just share enough to help them understand that you might be going through changes in mood, energy, or habits. A simple, "I'm going through a hard time after a loss" can open the door to understanding. You can choose what and how much to share. It's okay to keep details private and only say what feels comfortable.

How Grief Can Impact Daily Life:

- **Sleep:** You might sleep too much or struggle to sleep at all.
- **Energy:** You could feel physically drained or emotionally flat.
- **Mood:** Grief can cause irritability, sadness, or sudden emotional shifts.
- **Focus & Cleanliness:** You may forget tasks or find it hard to keep your space organized.

Suggestions for a Harmonious Household:

- Communicate clearly. Let housemates know when you need alone time or support.
- Set shared expectations. A quick check-in each week can reduce tension.
- Offer appreciation. A "thank you" for patience or kindness can go a long way.
- Create quiet zones or times. Even small boundaries can make a big difference.

Ideas to Reduce Conflict:

- Use notes or group chats for non-confrontational communication.
- Ask for help if dishes or chores become overwhelming.
- Suggest a shared calendar to help balance social energy.
- Take ownership when needed, but don't beat yourself up. You're grieving.

Grief can be disorienting. Living with peers during this time takes mutual respect and honesty.



Study Tips for Grief Fog

Grief affects your ability to concentrate, remember things, stay motivated, or even care about school. This doesn't mean you're failing, it means your mind is trying to protect you from emotional overload. Be patient with yourself.

Here are some small, realistic ways to study or stay afloat when you just don't have the energy.

Study Tips for Grief Fog

- **Use a timer (like 10–15 minutes).** Focus for a short burst, then take a real break.
- **Do just one thing.** Pick one task to complete like replying to an email, reading one page, or opening the assignment to just review. Starting is often the hardest part.
- **Study somewhere else.** A change of scenery (a library corner, outside bench, or café) can reduce distraction and help your brain shift gears.
- **Ask a classmate for notes or a summary.** Don't be afraid to lean on others right now.
- **Turn off expectations.** Lower the pressure. Aim to “show up” rather than be perfect.
- **Use music or white noise.** Try grief-safe playlists (avoid music that can be triggering) or ambient sounds to create focus.

Reward effort, not output. You opened your laptop? That's a win!

Quick Reminder:

Your brain isn't broken. It's grieving. Focus will come back with time, space, and support.



Academic Support Is There for a Reason

Cal Poly has systems in place to support students during times like this.

- Professors, advisors, and the Dean of Students are here for this.
- You can request extensions, incompletes, or even a reduced course load.
- Support doesn't mean you're falling behind, it means you're taking care of yourself.

You're not expected to navigate this alone, asking for help is part of healing.

Triggers & Emotional Waves

Grief Doesn't Always Give You a Warning

You might be having a regular day and then suddenly feel heavy, angry, overwhelmed, or like you've been pulled under by a wave. This doesn't mean you're going backwards. It means your grief is still moving through you.

These emotional waves are often triggered by reminders, even small ones. Knowing what your triggers are can help you meet them with more compassion and care.

Coping with the Waves

You can't always stop a trigger, but you can soften its impact. Here are a few ways to steady yourself when grief shows up unexpectedly:

Common Grief Triggers

- Holidays, birthdays, anniversaries
- Certain smells, places, or foods
- A song, photo, or old voicemail
- Seeing other people with their loved ones
- Silence, loneliness, or being unexpectedly alone
- Milestones you wish your person could witness
- Physical spaces like your childhood home or hospital settings

1. **Name it.** Acknowledge that you are grieving. It makes sense that you feel this way.
2. **Ground yourself.** Try 5-4-3-2-1 grounding: list 5 things you see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you hear, 2 things you smell, and 1 thing you taste.
3. **Create a routine anchor.** Keep one small consistent habit like morning tea, journaling, or walking at the same time each day.
4. **Make space, don't fight it.** You can cry, go for a walk, or lie down. Let your grief move through you.
5. **Connect.** Text a friend with a simple "Today's tough." You don't need to explain more.



When Triggers Catch You in Class

1. Step out for a few minutes, even if its just to breathe.
2. Let your professor know if a class topic feels emotionally difficult. You can do this by leaving class and emailing the professor.
3. Use grounding items like a stone or bracelet to fidget with.

Advice From Students

Advice From Us, For You

This page is a space for real advice, things we wish someone had told us, reminders that helped us, and small ways we learned to keep going.

We don't have all the answers, but we know what it's like to feel lost.

"My grief didn't look like my sisters', and for a long time, that made me feel really confused and angry."

Losing my mom was beyond messy. While my sisters grieved someone who they were close with, I was grieving a relationship I never really had. I felt so many emotions, even numbness. And then guilty for feeling numb. It's been three years since her passing and I still don't know how I feel. Sometimes relived, other times angry. It took me a while to understand that all of those feelings were grief, too.

If your loss feels complicated, that doesn't make it any less real. You're allowed to mourn what you didn't get, to feel both pain and relief, and to carry mixed emotions without having to justify them to anyone (even to your family).

-Alyna, Cal Poly Student

"Keep pushing forward and achieve the goals that my mom wanted me to achieve."

It's okay to not be okay. Don't let people's actions or lack thereof define your worth. You're stronger than you give yourself credit for. Also, not being too hard on yourself is important.

-Danny, Cal Poly Student

"They are proud of everything you did and will be proud of everything you will continue to do."

My mom was a teacher, and she always encouraged me to pursue knowledge and do something meaningful with my education. Even though I've struggled with guilt about being away at school and missing precious time with her, I know in my heart that she was proud of me. She knew I was exactly where I needed to be...growing through experience, learning, and working toward the life she dreamed for me. Her belief in the power of education is something I carry with me every day, and I continue to learn and grow in her honor.

-Amber, Cal Poly Student

Boundaries & Hurtful Comments

Setting Boundaries After A Loss

When you are grieving, even people who have the best intentions can say the wrong thing, or may ask more of you than you are ready to give. Setting boundaries is not rude, it is a form of self care.

Here are a few gentle ways to protect your energy:

- “I appreciate you checking in, but I’m not ready to talk about it right now.”
- “I’m having a hard day, could we talk about something lighter?”
- “I appreciate you reaching out, but I need some space today.”
- “I’m still figuring out how I feel, and I’d rather not go into it yet.”

When Someone Says the Wrong Thing

People often try to comfort others with familiar phrases they have been exposed to. Sometimes general phrases can hurt, especially when they oversimplify deep pain.

If someone says: “Everything happens for a reason...”

You can respond with: “I know you are trying to help, but I don’t find that comforting right now.”

If someone says: “They’re in a better place.”

You can respond with: “That might be true for you, but I’m still missing them here.”

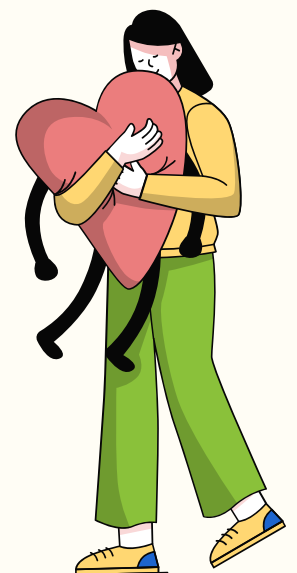
If someone says: “At least they’re not suffering anymore.”

You can respond with: “I’m glad they’re at peace, but I’m still hurting.”

It’s important to remember that you do not have to explain your grief.

- You can say “That comment didn’t sit right with me.”
- You can walk away from a conversation you’re not ready for.
- You can feel angry and still be healing.
- You can protect your peace, even if others don’t understand why.
- You can set boundaries with people who invalidate your experience.

Your pain doesn’t need to be visible or explained to be valid.



Grieving Without Closure

Not every relationship is easy to talk about. You might be grieving someone who hurt you, abandoned you, or never really knew the true version of you. You may feel angry, numb, confused, or relieved.

Grief doesn't require closeness or a perfect goodbye. Even if the relationship was painful or unresolved, your grief is still real and it deserves space.



It's Okay if Your Grief Feels Confusing

Not all losses are clean or easy to understand. You might be grieving someone who:

- Was absent, estranged, or uninvolved in your life.
- Caused you harm.
- Rejected your identity.
- Left things unresolved or unfinished.

You might feel sadness, guilt, anger, numbness, relief—or all of them at the same time. That doesn't mean you're grieving wrong. It means your relationship was layered, and your grief is too.

Estranged Families, Complicated Grief

If your relationship with the person you lost was strained, abusive, or nonexistent, you might feel:

- Conflicted emotions like guilt, anger, relief, or confusion.
- Pressure to perform grief “correctly”.
- Alone in how you process it.

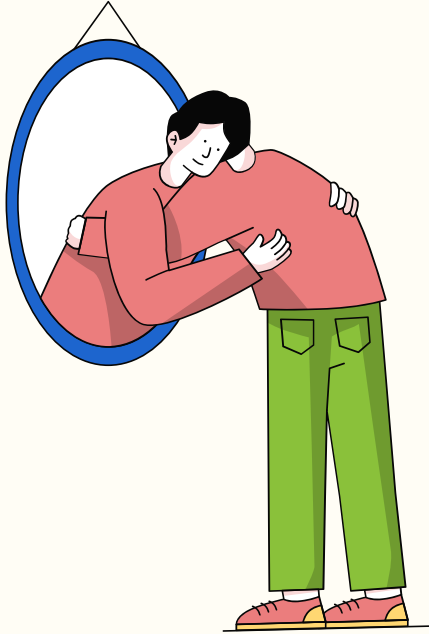
Mixed Feelings Are Normal

Grief after a complicated relationship might include:

- Regret for what could've been.
- Anger about what never was.
- Shame or confusion about how you “should” feel.
- Feeling isolated because others don't understand your experience.



Grieving Without Closure



You May Be Grieving:

- A future you never got to have with the person you lost.
- An apology that never came.
- A relationship you needed but didn't receive.
- A sense of belonging or identity tied to that person.
- The version of them you hoped they'd become.
- The chance to rewrite or repair the relationship on your own terms.

You Are Still Allowed To:

- Grieve what you never got.
- Feel both pain and relief.
- Talk to someone even if you "weren't close".
- Set boundaries around how others talk about the person.
- Feel unsure about how you feel, and let that be enough.

Try This:

- If I could say anything to this person, even if it's just for myself, what would I say?
- What parts of me still feel stuck in that relationship?
- What would healing look like on my terms?
- Write a letter to the version of them you wish they could have been.
- Name what you're grieving: not just who, but what (trust, safety, closure, etc.).

An Important Reminder:

Grief is not earned by the quality of a relationship. It's a response to loss, whatever that loss meant to you. You are allowed to feel everything, and you are allowed to feel nothing.

You are also allowed to protect your energy as you heal, even if that means taking space from people who don't understand your grief.



Chosen Family & Queer Grief

Grief Doesn't Follow a Family Tree

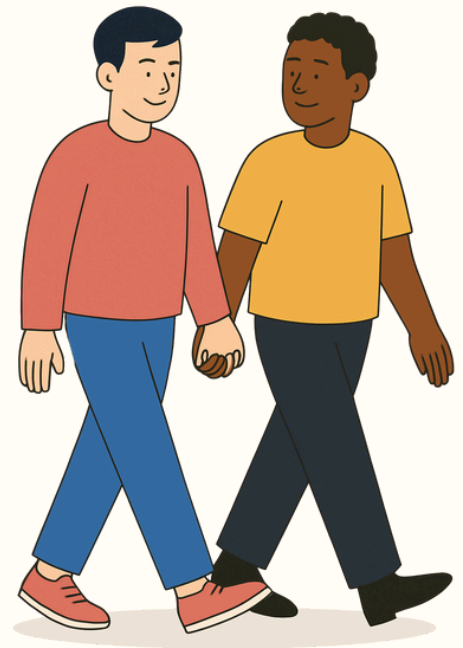
Grief isn't limited to parents, siblings, or blood relatives. For many students, including LGBTQ+ individuals, those with complicated home lives, or those raised in non-traditional family structures, loss may center around chosen family: the people who showed up, held space, and helped you feel seen.

If you're grieving a friend, mentor, ex-partner, roommate, drag parent, or someone who is not "traditionally" seen as family, your grief is still real and still matters.

Queer Grief is Real

For LGBTQ+ students, grief may carry added layers:

- You might have been excluded from rituals because others didn't recognize your relationship.
- You might feel guilt for not being out to the person you lost, or fear that they didn't accept you.
- You may grieve in secret to avoid being outed or invalidated.
- You may be the only person mourning that person in your current space.



You deserve to grieve fully, out loud, and without needing to prove your loss.



Ways to Honor Nontraditional Loss

- Create your own ritual, even if your community doesn't recognize the loss.
- Build a memory altar for your version of family.
- Talk to a counselor who affirms queer identities and complex grief.
- Journal a memory or message you never got to share with the person you lost.
- Honor their name in your own way, whether in quiet reflection or shared conversation.

Cultural Grief

Why This Matters

Grief is not one-size-fits-all. Cultural traditions shape how we honor our loved ones and find healing. Yet, most grief resources are built around Western norms that emphasize privacy, speed, and “moving on.”

If your grief looks or feels different, that is okay. It’s valid, and it belongs here. Your cultural rituals, languages, and beliefs are powerful tools for healing. This page invites you to reclaim them.

Cultural Traditions Across Communities

Below are just a few ways grief is expressed in different cultures. Every person and family is unique and there’s no “right” way to grieve.



Latinx Traditions

Mourning may involve novenas (9-day prayer gatherings), altar-building (ofrendas), candles, food offerings, or visits to cemeteries. Día de los Muertos is a sacred time to celebrate and remember ancestors.



Indigenous Traditions

Mourning may involve seasonal ceremonies, smudging, song, storytelling, or time spent on ancestral land. Some tribes observe extended periods of quiet reflection.



Black Traditions

Mourning may involve church services and repasts (communal meals) that provide space to mourn together. Music, spoken word, and open expression of emotion are often central to the process.

Cultural Grief



Jewish Traditions

Mourning may involve sitting in shiva (a 7-day in-home mourning period), recite the Kaddish prayer, and light yahrzeit candles on anniversaries.



Muslim Traditions

Mourning may involve preparing the individual quickly for burial, praying Janazah, and offering 3-day (or more) family gatherings for recitation and support. Silence and prayer are often central.



East Asian + Filipino Traditions

Mourning may involve 49 or 100-day rituals, white clothing, incense, photos, and offerings at home altars. Elders and extended family play a strong role.

A Note to Others

If someone grieves differently than you, that doesn't make it "wrong." Be curious, not judgmental. Respecting someone's grief practices is a form of support. Everyone's relationship to loss is personal and shaped by culture, experience, and belief. Instead of assuming what someone needs, it is better to ask.

Honor Your Grief, Your Way

1. Light candles, display photos, or speak out to your loved one.
2. Create a small altar in your room with items that matter to you.
3. Speak in your spiritual or cultural language.
4. Ask for time off to attend cultural rituals or religious services.
5. Say a prayer, chant, or meditation before bed.
6. Make a meal that reminds you of someone you lost.

Cultural Grief

When you Feel Culturally Disconnected

Even if you're not sure what your culture's grieving practices are, you can still honor your loss in a way that feels right to you. You are allowed to explore, create, or reclaim practices on your own terms. There is no wrong way to honor someone you love.

Layers of Loss: Culture, Identity and More

Grief is not only shaped by culture but is also shaped by gender, religion, immigration status, age, and access to resources. A first-generation student grieving an individual overseas might face very different stress than a student who grew up with access to grief counseling.

All grief is valid. Your story matters.

Cultural Journal Prompts

- How does your cultural background shape the way you express or suppress grief?
- Are there any beliefs or customs from your heritage that bring you comfort or conflict in your grief?
- Have you ever felt “not enough” of your culture to grieve in a certain way?
- What rituals, traditional or personal, help you feel connected to your lost loved one?
- Have you ever felt pressure to grieve in a way that didn't feel true to you? Where did that pressure come from, and how did it affect you?



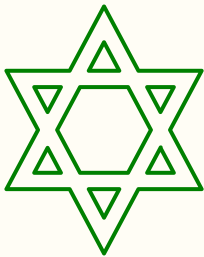
Faith & Spiritual Grief Practices

Grief and Belief

Whether you were raised in a religious tradition, are spiritually curious, or are not sure what you believe, it is okay to let your spiritual needs show up during your grief journey.

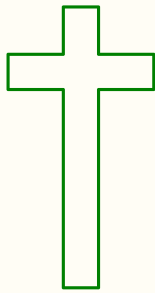
Faith & Spiritual Traditions Across Communities

Below are just a few ways grief is expressed in different beliefs. Every person and family is unique and there's no "right" way to grieve.



Judaism

Mourners may "sit shiva" (a 7-day home mourning period), recite the Mourner's Kaddish daily, or light a yahrzeit candle on anniversaries. Judaism honors structured remembrance and community support.



Christianity

Grief may include prayer, church services, candle lighting, reading scripture, or trusting in reunion with loved ones in heaven. Many Christian communities also offer grief ministries or support groups.



Islam

Muslims often engage in Janazah (funeral prayer), read Quran verses, and say du'a (prayers) for the deceased. Mourning may last 3–40 days or more, with time for quiet reflection and remembrance.



Buddhism

Buddhist grief rituals may include chanting, incense, offerings, meditation on impermanence, or dedicating merit to the deceased. Ceremonies like the 49-day memorial help guide the soul's transition.

Faith and Spiritual Grief Practices



Hinduism

Traditions may involve lighting a funeral pyre, reciting mantras, and observing a mourning period that includes puja (prayers) and rituals performed by the family. Water offerings and memorial shrines are common.



Indigenous & Earth-Based Practices

These vary by tribe or tradition, but many include smudging, drumming, songs, storytelling, or time on the land. Grief may also involve honoring ancestors and maintaining spiritual connection through ritual.



Spiritual Paths or Personal Belief

You may find healing in crystals, tarot, nature walks, music, or simply sitting in silence. Your version of spirituality does not have to follow a specific religion or tradition to be meaningful.

Blended or Evolving Beliefs

It's okay if your spiritual life is a mix of traditions, practices, or ideas. You might draw comfort from a church sermon and a tarot card reading, or pray one day and stay silent the next. There's no one path to healing. What matters most is what feels grounding and supportive to you.

Grief Looks Different Across Spiritual Identities

You may be part of a faith community, spiritual but not religious, agnostic, or unsure, and still feel grief deeply.

- You can grieve without believing in an afterlife.
- You can pray even if you don't know who you're praying to.
- You can find peace without having answers.

Whatever your beliefs may be, your grief deserves a space, and your healing deserves to be honored.

Understanding Prolonged Grief Disorder

What Is Prolonged Grief Disorder?

Grief doesn't follow a schedule. For many people, it softens with time, but for others it can stay intense, overwhelming, or disruptive for months to years.

Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) is a mental health condition that occurs when deep feelings of loss continue over an extended period, over 12 months, and begin to interfere with daily life. It doesn't mean you're grieving "wrong." It means you might need more time, space, or support.

You Might Be Experiencing Prolonged Grief If:

- You feel stuck in grief without much change, even after many months.
- You can't stop reliving the loss or you think about the person constantly.
- You avoid reminders of the loss or seek them out obsessively.
- You feel like part of you died with them.
- It's difficult to imagine a meaningful future without them.
- You've lost interest in school, relationships, or things you once enjoyed.

PGD is not a weakness. It's a sign that your grief needs more care, not less.

What Helps

- Talk to someone. A grief-informed therapist or counselor can help you untangle your feelings and feel less alone.
- Name it. Just knowing that prolonged grief is a real thing can reduce shame or confusion.
- Be gentle with yourself. There's no deadline for healing, but support can make the path easier.

Self Reflection Prompts

Grief doesn't follow a checklist. These prompts are here to help you reflect on your experience, not to diagnose. Take a breath. There are no wrong answers.

- What part of my grief feels like it hasn't shifted or softened over time?
- Have I pulled away from people, routines, or responsibilities more than I used to?
- What have I stopped doing that used to bring me comfort or joy?
- Have I found ways to talk about my grief, or does it feel too overwhelming to share?

Closing Thoughts

A Note for You

This resource was made by grieving students, and each page carries a piece of someone who has felt what you're feeling, struggled in silence, and learned that healing doesn't happen all at once.

Students may turn to this guide for different reasons. Some are in the middle of a recent loss. Others are navigating grief that's been with them for a long time. Some are supporting a friend. Some are just trying to understand what they're feeling.

Whatever brought you here, we hope you found something helpful.

Grief doesn't have a clear path, but reaching out for support is an important part of the journey. As you move forward, we encourage you to continue seeking support through friends, faculty, campus resources, counseling, and your community.

Let this guide stay with you, in whatever way you need it.

With care,
Alyna Gibson & Amber Pepito



CAL POLY

*In Loving Memory
This guide is dedicated to our moms
Elizabeth Gibson & Cheri Pepito*

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