

COPING WITH FEAR

In the aftermath of loss, fear can play a dominant role. Some fears are irrational, some not. It's easy to become convinced that lightning can strike twice, and our brains often live in fear of that second strike.

Those who have lost a loved one in a car accident might fear being in a car. Those who have lost a loved one to an illness might fear every cough or sneeze. A common fear for many is that we'll forget our loved one, as will the world. Below are fears commonly experienced by mourners (excerpted from *Grief Diaries: How to Help the Newly Bereaved*, 2016).

COMMON FEARS

1. **The future.** We fear what the future holds for us in the absence of our deceased loved one. We fear future holidays, future vacations, and future family members never knowing our loved one. We often fear making new memories without our loved one.
2. **Losing another loved one.** Because losing another loved one does sometimes happen, we fear it will happen to us a second time. The thought of facing the same wretched journey all over again strikes terror in our hearts.
3. **Failing to reach loved ones.** Because grief heightens our fear of losing another loved one, when we fail to reach those we love on the phone or the computer, anxiety can build rather quickly triggering a wave of panic.
4. **Traveling.** Whether we've lost a loved one in a crash or not, traveling can exacerbate the fear of losing another loved one in a car, plane, bus, boat, bike or some other means of transportation.
5. **Being alone or growing old alone.** Widows and widowers often fear never being loved again.
6. **Lifetime repercussions for our loved ones.** Sometimes we fear that those we love feel just as sad as we do, and it's instinct to want to protect them from such pain. We fear they won't recover from the loss, or that the grief will force them down the wrong path.
7. **Feeling sad forever.** Grief sadness can feel so overwhelming that we fear it will never evaporate. We fear living a joyless life forever.
8. **Falling apart or feeling "crazy" forever.** We fear giving in and allowing ourselves to do the grief work for fear we'll never survive the pain.
9. **Forgetting details about our loved one.** We fear we'll forget the little things such as the smell of their hair, the sound of their voice, their laughter, their little mannerisms, or what their hug feels like.

10. **Our loved one being forgotten.** We fear our deceased loved one will be forgotten by others, leaving us to carry the grief burden alone.
11. **Someone who looks like our love one.** When we see someone who resembles our loved one, it steals our breath and is like a kick in the stomach. It's hard to hold the tears back.
12. **The holidays.** We fear seeing the empty chair and family traditions that will never feel the same.
13. **Dying.** When we lose a loved one, we often fear dying ourselves. If we die too soon, what happens to those we care for? Who will take care of them? Who will wipe their tears?
14. **Returning to work.** We often fear what coworkers and colleagues will think. Will they feel uncomfortable around us? Will they ignore our loss and pretend nothing happened? Will they ask too many questions? Will I make it through the day without being triggered?

TIPS FOR COPING

1. **Acknowledge the fear.** Facing fear head-on can help to eliminate some of its power.
2. **Expect irrational fears.** This is normal, as grief exacerbates or heightens many of our fears.
3. **Take time to understand.** A fear can be severe. Take time to understand the root of the fear (rejection, failure, etc.) without judgment.
4. **Create a plan.** Proactive planning is empowering. Identify what you fear most and create a plan so you feel more in control.
5. **Patience is key.** Find a safe outlet to share and vent your fears. Externalizing them in a safe environment will eventually allow you to process your fears and work through them.

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTION

What fears have you struggled with most since your loss?
