

Autism & Grief Project

How We Grieve Fact Sheet



In the same way that one person on the autism spectrum differs from the next, the way we each respond to and cope with grief is different.

Our individual coping responses to loss are often referred to by grief experts as grieving styles. Our style may be influenced, but is not determined, by our gender, ethnicity, and culture. For a person with autism, their way of coping may be shaped by their strengths, challenges, cognitive processes, and trauma history. Each of us needs to, and should be, encouraged to express grief in ways that are comfortable.

Understanding the different grieving styles can be helpful as you cope with your own grief and as you support an autistic adult who is grieving. It can also be helpful in managing potential conflicts. While grief in neurotypical people has been widely studied, the experience of grief in autistic adults is an emerging field.

Interviews with autistic adults as well as experience from professionals who work with them suggest that autistic individuals tend to follow styles similar to the neurotypical population. We encourage you to be open to how your loved one with autism expresses grief and give them space to share their grief if, and when, they are ready.

Grieving Styles

Research on the neurotypical population has shown there are four common styles of grievers, and these styles may also be reflected in the autistic population. The four common styles are:

- “Heart” grievers – Experience grief as a highly emotional reaction and might express their feelings through crying, rage, or withdrawal. Also known as “intuitive” grievers, they experience and express strong, and even contradictory, emotions such as anger, guilt, loneliness, sadness, or yearning for the person who died.
- “Head” grievers – Express grief in a cognitive way by thinking about the person often and taking action in response to the death. Also known as “instrumental” grievers, they might immerse themselves in “doing things” such as making a photo album, putting together a music playlist, or engaging in physical exercise.
- “Heart + Head” grievers – Express grief in some combination of the styles above and are also known as “blended” grievers.
- “Heart vs. Head” grievers – Experience grief as a highly emotion reaction but repress feelings.

No style or pattern is better or worse, right or wrong. Grieving styles are simply expressions of individuality and neurology. Different grieving styles don't need to be a source of conflict. In fact, the differences in the styles of coping within families or relationships can be beneficial, as the patterns can complement each other. For example, a head griever may find solace in choosing music or readings for a service, while the heart griever may find comfort in drawing a picture of the deceased or speaking about their loved one at the service.

Helpful Tip

As you help your loved one cope with grief, it is important to remember and share with your loved one that:

- We grieve because we love
- We can't expect others to grieve the same way we do
- We grieve on our own time schedules
- We grieve differently and in the way that is right for us
- We will support each other regardless of grieving styles