

Autism & Grief Project

Journeying with Grief Fact Sheet



Grief and loss can be painful, disorienting, and difficult, but the experience can also result in increased resilience, opportunity, and achievement.

We can grow stronger because of loss and experience what is called posttraumatic growth.

Tips for Navigating the Journey

Below are suggestions to help you support a person with autism navigate their journey with grief. Some of the tips may be helpful to you as well.

Learn from Past Success

A good question to ask can be, “What or who helped you feel better last time?” What techniques worked when handling past crises and how could those be useful now? Even if the person with autism has not experienced a death before, focusing on coping skills that have helped them in the past can be helpful now.

Recognize the Value of Choice

Sometimes what may seem like a small choice can bring a great sense of control and comfort. After a death, there are many options of attending memorials, visiting with other people, etc. Having some ability to choose which activities to participate in (or skip) may help the person with autism in their grief process.

Find Ways to Remember

Creating a photo collage or finding a special memento of the person who has died can be a helpful reminder that the memories will continue. The concept of death is intangible and abstract for anyone but may be especially so for an autistic adult. A tangible reminder of the person who died may be an effective way to remember the deceased.

Provide for Inclusion

For some people, being physically present and able to see the body of the person who died at a funeral or other ritual event, or in the home if the person had been receiving home care, is critically important. The decision should be their choice, as should that of whether to participate with others in all the rituals surrounding a death. Being excluded without the opportunity of choice usually impairs the grief journey significantly. Visit the Role of Ritual section for helpful suggestions that allow for inclusion.

Keep Sight of the Future

Remember that while life after a death or a loss will be different, there will again be moments of joy and happiness. Consider setting small goals for next week, next month, or next year, and set manageable daily changes that can help achieve those goals.

Provide Reassurance

Continue to provide reminders that their responses to grief are expected and will be supported. While there may be disruptions to daily life or schedules, let them know their routines will return. Help them understand that during times of grief, people often come together and express grief in ways that may not feel comfortable to them, but this is part of how others show concern and love for each other.