

# The Journey of Grief

GRIEF SUPPORT HANDBOOK



**HOSPICE**  
OF SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

**Grief Support Program**

**We're here for you. Call (831) 430-3000**





We cannot release or heal grief by the use of our minds alone.  
The brain must follow the heart at a respectful distance.  
Certainly the mind suffers, the mind recalls, the mind may plot and plan...  
But it is the heart that will blaze the trail through the thicket of grief.

CAROL STAUDACHER



# Understanding Grief

This booklet is designed to help you to understand, acknowledge, and work through your grief. Healing from grief is not easy, and you don't have to do it alone. Since 1978, Hospice of Santa Cruz County has supported people of all ages in recognizing and understanding the journey of grief.

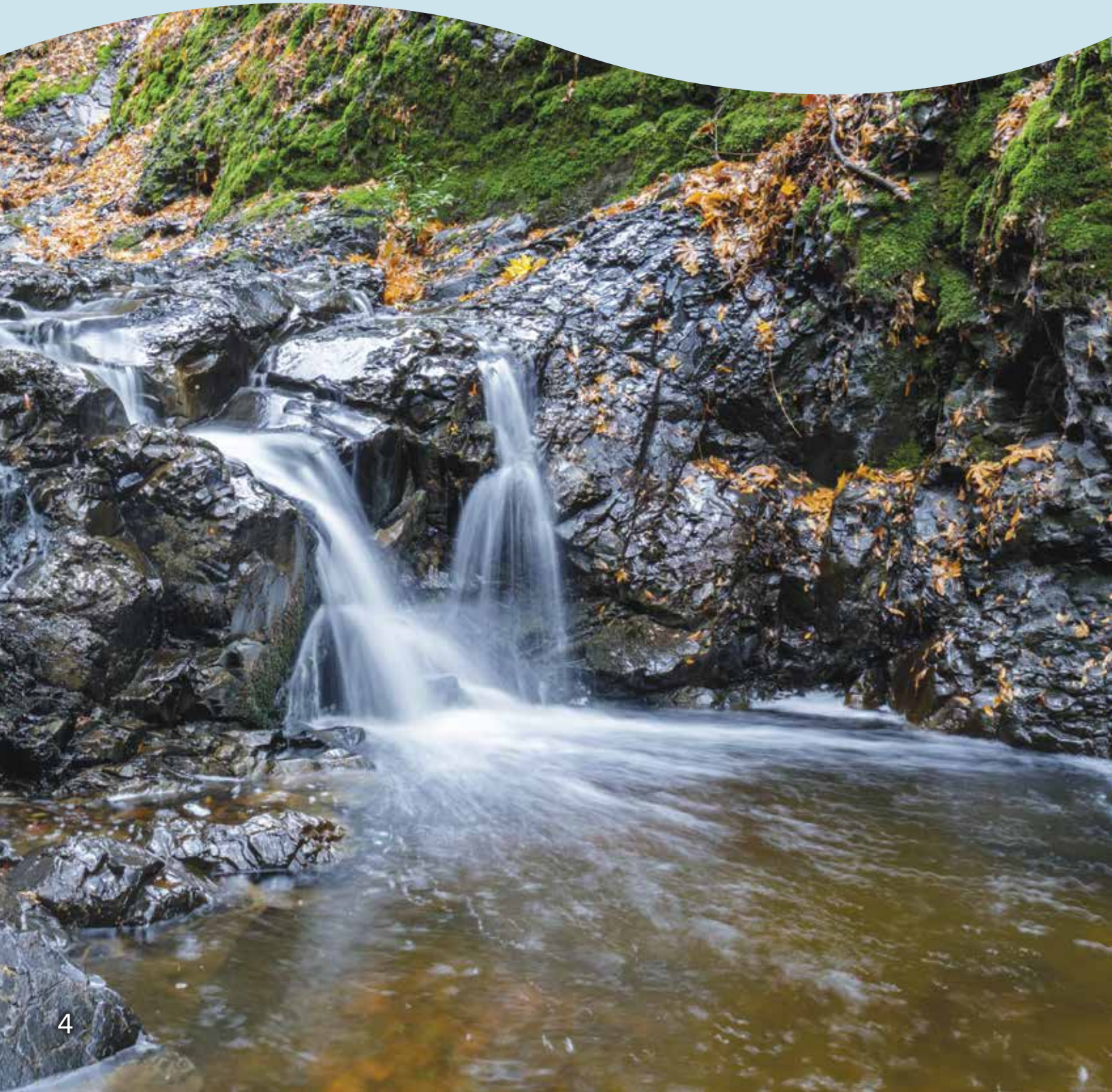
The information in this booklet has been compiled from many different sources which we have found to be helpful over the years. We invite you to find some quiet time to sit and reflect on this information. Call us at (831) 430-3000 to discuss how we can help you.

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There are things that we don't want to happen but have to accept,  
things we don't want to know but have to learn,  
and people we can't live without but have to let go.

AUTHOR UNKNOWN







## The Journey of Grief

The death of someone close can throw us into a sea of chaotic feelings seemingly powerful enough to threaten our very survival. These feelings may feel relentless and never-ending, then quiet down only to arise months or even years later when we least expect them.

Grief is the natural human response to any loss, not only death. Illness, a job change, a divorce, a separation, unfulfilled dreams, a move to a new location, or any other change can bring about a grief response. Grief is not a problem; it is a normal, healthy process of healing.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. In the period of loss following death, you may feel many conflicting emotions such as sadness, anger, fear, and guilt all at the same time. This can sometimes seem intolerable. It is important to recognize that these feelings are normal and will not feel as intense with time, support and the opportunity to talk about your loss. You may experience people saying things or giving advice that you do not find helpful. Find the people who can listen to you and provide the support that works for you.

Grieving is not done all at once. There is no tidy progression of stages in grief, and its course may be long and circular. Most of us move in and out of grief, alternately feeling the pain and reality of the loss, and then taking time to engage in life's ongoing tasks. It's okay to experience pleasure and focus on other things even while grieving.

There is no clear roadmap to grief because each person's experience is unique. This booklet explains common aspects of grief and provides some tools which may help you navigate this process and find your own path to healing.



# The Many Faces of Grief

## Shock and Surprise

Even if the death is expected, you may feel numb for several weeks or months afterward. Your actions may be mechanical. You get things done (for example, handle all the funeral details), but you are not “all there.” People around you may be saying, “Isn’t he strong?” or “She’s handling this so well.” The impact or reality of the death has not fully reached you. This period of shock is your psyche’s way of protecting you by allowing reality to set in slowly. If the loss is sudden, unexpected, or violent, the period of numbness may be longer.

## Emotional Release

As the shock wears off, reality can be acutely painful. As the full impact gradually dawns, conflict may arise about whether or not to show grief. How much can you share and for how long? You might try to keep up a good front or remain strong, even though you may feel like crying or screaming. If people are praising you for being so brave and not “falling apart,” do you dare show them how you really feel? This is a time when emotional release is important and encouraged. Concealing painful feelings may prolong the grief process and increase physical and emotional distress. At this point family, friends, or a grief counselor can help support your expressions of grief.

## Loneliness

Family and friends can be helpful and consoling at first, but may not check in as much as time goes on. The memorial may be the focus for realizing that your loved one is really gone. Loneliness, isolation, and depression may begin once the memorial service is over.

After the memorial service you may suffer a second major loss: the loss of regular contact with your loved one. Your entire routine of daily living may have been shattered. You may be suddenly overcome by an utter sense of depression and despair. It is important at this point to have people in your life who can validate the magnitude of your loss.

## Anxiety and Physical Distress

Some questions that may come up for you are the following: “What am I going to do? What’s going to happen to me? How can I get along without them? Will I lose my friends?” Exhaustion, anxiety, and grief itself may cause physical symptoms such as shortness of breath, insomnia, headaches, backaches, or an upset stomach. During the entire grief process, take especially good care of your body. You may feel vulnerable and need a lot more rest. See your physician if physical symptoms are serious or persistent.

## Panic and Disorganization

You may have trouble concentrating on anything but the loss. You may think something is wrong with you. You may replay thoughts such as these: “I can’t get the images out of my mind; won’t they ever stop? Sometimes I think I see her. Sometimes I feel his touch. Sometimes I hear her voice. I’ve got to do something. I can’t sleep or eat. All I do is think about her. Will it ever stop hurting? Will I ever stop dreaming about him?” As a bereaved person, you need to know that this does not mean you are going crazy. This is a normal part of the grieving process.

## Guilt

When faced with real or imagined guilt, you may begin asking yourself questions like these: “What did I do wrong? Why didn’t we spend more time together? Why didn’t I do more to show him I loved him?”



These questions and many others may indicate guilt, regrets, or unfinished business. These feelings can be brought to the surface by sharing them with a nonjudgmental listener, or in a letter or journal.

### **Hostility and Anger**

Along with these feelings of guilt, you may experience hostility. Maybe you feel some hostility toward people whom you believe have contributed to your problem. For example, you may feel angry with a physician and wonder why he or she didn't do something differently. You may be experiencing anger at your friends who draw away from you or seem to belittle your loss with well-meaning but clumsy remarks. You may be furious with God or fate for taking away your loved one. You may also be angry with your loved one for dying and abandoning you. Anger is a very normal human emotion, and it is important to find ways to release thoughts like these: "What I'm going through is so unfair! Why did it have to happen to him — he was such a good person?" Talking about your thoughts or feelings and engaging in physical activity are both good ways to keep anger from burning inside you.

### **Suffering in Silence and Depression**

This is also a time when you may suffer in silence. You might feel fatigued, worn out, and unable to get started on any activity. Your thought processes are involved with the loss, but you may no longer want to talk about it. You may feel that others expect you to stop grieving. Tears, anger, frustration, or depression may be poorly tolerated by others several weeks after the funeral. You may have feelings of not wanting to go on and then may be shocked or feel guilty for having such thoughts. This is a period where you are recreating meaning in life and it takes time.

### **Gradual Overcoming of Grief**

Your adjustment to a new phase in life gradually occurs by working through this grief period. There can be a noticeable change in the first few months, but often it is much longer. By the end of this phase, there is a considerable brightening of mood, more activity and the beginning of reestablishing connections with people.

### **Readjustment to the "New Normal"**

While the most intense grief may ease in a few months to a year, readjustment can continue for several years. Because traditional symbols of grief such as a black veil or clothing, an armband, or a black wreath on the front door are out of style, it is easy for others to forget that you are grieving. You are beginning to restructure your life without your loved one. You may want to take a vacation, get involved in a new activity or take up old activities that you used to enjoy. Occasionally, you may feel twinges of guilt as you begin to enjoy yourself or laugh freely again, as though you are somehow betraying the memory of your lost loved one. It is helpful to be aware of feelings of guilt that get in the way of readjustment.

It is also helpful to recognize that wedding anniversaries, holidays, birthdays, or the anniversary date of the death may cause a flood of feelings or may bring back a shorter version of the grief process. These feelings are normal and do not mean that you will be in acute pain forever.

# Common Grief Reactions

There are many different feelings and physical symptoms that people in grief experience. It may be helpful to know that all of the following reactions are normal and common. Which of these reactions describe your experience?

## PHYSICALLY, YOU MAY EXPERIENCE:

- Exhaustion
- Emptiness in stomach
- Tightness in chest
- Shortness of breath
- Dry mouth
- Increased noise sensitivity
- Appetite changes
- Sleep disturbances
- Low motivation

## MANY DIFFERENT EMOTIONS CAN BE FELT AT ONCE:

- Sadness
- Loneliness
- Anger
- Guilt
- Anxiety
- Shock
- Relief
- Numbness
- Depression
- Sudden crying
- Fear
- Helplessness

## YOUR THOUGHTS MAY INCLUDE:

- Disbelief
- Distraction
- Absentmindedness
- Forgetfulness
- Dreaming of him/her
- Poor concentration
- Memories of other losses
- Denial
- Diminished self concern

## SOCIALLY, YOU MAY FEEL:

- A need to withdraw
- Less desire to converse
- A need to take care of others

## YOUR ACTIONS MAY INCLUDE:

- Carrying special objects
- Crying
- Visiting the gravesite
- Talking to the person who died

## SPIRITUAL QUESTIONS MAY COME UP:

- What will happen to me when I die?
- Where is he/she now?
- How could God allow this?
- When will I die?





## Tasks of Grief

### **Accept the reality of the loss**

When someone dies, even when the death is expected, there is often a sense that it hasn't happened. The first task of grieving is to slowly realize that the person is gone and will not return. Denying the loss, the meaning of the loss or the irreversibility of the loss only serves to prolong the grief process.

### **Experience the pain of grief**

Many people try to bypass feelings of loss in a variety of ways: being strong, avoiding painful thoughts, or keeping busy. There is no healthy way of avoiding this pain. Allow yourself to experience and express your feelings even though you may find this difficult. Many feelings and experiences are normal: anger, guilt, loneliness, anxiety, and depression. Ask for the support of friends. Tell them what you need from them because people often misunderstand the needs of the grieving. Be assured that the memory of your loved one will continue, but the pain will lessen in time.

### **Adjust to a world in which the person who has died is gone**

This means different things to different people, depending on the relationship. Many survivors resent or are fearful of having to develop new skills and to take on roles that were formerly performed by the person who died. There may be many practical daily affairs with which you may need help and advice. The emotions involved in letting go—in not having that person's love, support, or assistance—may be painful but necessary to experience.

### **Find an enduring connection with the person who died while starting a new life**

The final task is to eventually find a place within you for the deceased that will enable you to have a continuing connection with him or her while moving forward with life. This means finding ways to remember your loved one, keeping the love and the memories of that person with you—and also going on with life. For many people this is the most difficult task of all, but ultimately it, too, can be embraced and accomplished and give your life new meaning.

BASED ON WILLIAM WORDEN'S "TASKS OF GRIEF"



# Surviving a Loss

## What Do You Need During Grief?

**Take good care of yourself.** Take a minute every so often throughout your day to focus on your breath. Get plenty of rest. Resume your routine of physical activity when it is comfortable. If new or unusual health symptoms arise, see a physician.

**Keep nutrition in mind.** Good eating habits help the healing process and defeat stress. Drink enough fluids, especially water.

**Maintain a regular schedule.** Plan your days. Activity will give you a sense of order. Avoid setting unrealistic expectations and goals for yourself.

**Be gentle with yourself.** Treat yourself with care. Avoid self-judgment. Take a break from “I should...” What you are going through is natural and has no specific timetable.

**Keep decision making to a minimum.** Expect your judgment to be clouded for a while. You are going through change; don’t add additional changes if you can avoid them.

**Seek comfort.** Don’t just accept support from others — seek it. It’s human and courageous. Find a supportive person or people you can trust. Share honest feelings with them.

**Find someone who can listen.** Tell your story as often as you find it helpful. Remembering is healing. Grief may need a thousand tellings.

**Hope.** You may find hope and comfort from those who have experienced a similar loss. Knowing some things that helped them and realizing that they have recovered may give you hope that sometime in the future your grief will feel less raw and painful.

**Be willing to engage in your grief.** For example, crying, taking time to be with memories, and expressing your feelings will allow you to grieve.

**Give yourself permission to backslide.** Sometimes after a period of feeling good, we find ourselves back in the old feelings of extreme sadness, despair, or anger. This is the nature of grief — up and down — and it may happen over and over for a time. It happens because as humans we cannot take in all of the pain and the meaning of death all at once. So we let it in a little at a time.

**Surround yourself with living things.** A new plant, a pet, or a bowl of fresh fruit can be uplifting.

**Let yourself mourn.** Give your pain time and attention. Feelings of grief will be expressed one way or another and will come at various times of your life.

**Enjoy small pleasures.** Do not underestimate the healing effects of small pleasures as you are ready. Sunsets, a walk in the woods, a favorite food — all of these are small steps toward regaining your pleasure in life itself.

**Keep a journal.** Putting your thoughts and feelings on paper is a good way to get them out. You can look back and see just how far you have come.



**Set aside quiet time.** Choose a time when you can be alone with your thoughts and feelings. Sit down during the day and reflect, look at photos, and remember times past, or take a walk in a place where there were special memories. At the beginning of these quiet times you may have a rush of feelings. Feel them. You will eventually quiet down. At this time, you could play some quiet music or listen to a tape with some relaxing sounds such as ocean waves or gentle rainfall.

**Heal at your own pace.** Do not compare yourself to another grieving person. Each of us has his or her own timing in these matters.

**Rest.** During this time your body is trying very hard to heal your emotional wounds and you may tire easily. Take a nap in the middle of the day if possible. It is common to have sleeping difficulties. You have a great deal on your mind and it is hard to turn it off. If you are having trouble sleeping at night, try playing quiet, meditative music by your bed or reading until you feel ready to sleep again. Have a cup of herbal tea or warm milk and sip slowly, breathe deeply, and give your mind permission to slow down.

**Be alert to addictive activities.** Alcohol, drugs, food, and other diversions can all momentarily help us escape from pain. But we can easily become dependent on them and this never helps us to heal.

**Set small goals.** For a while it may seem that much of life is without meaning. At times like these, small goals are helpful. Something to look forward to like playing tennis with a friend next week, a movie tomorrow night, or a trip next month may help you get through

the time in the immediate future. Living one day at a time is a good practice. At first, don't be surprised if your enjoyment of these things isn't the same as before your loss. This is normal. As time passes, you may need to work on some longer-range goals to give some structure and direction to your life.

**Write a letter or draw a picture.** These are healing ways to get feelings from the inside to the outside. Writing to the person who has died or to yourself, public agencies, institutions or anybody else involved in supporting your loved one, enables you to process what you long to say. It also enables you to release anger, frustration, and isolation and move to a forgiving, life-affirming love for yourself and for those who have touched your life.

**Begin to look to the future.** Begin to experiment with new life choices and new ways of filling the day. They might even turn out to be fun!

**Be open.** Give yourself opportunities to meet new people, go to new places, and have new ideas and experiences, but don't forget to build on the past. Don't throw out what has been worthwhile to you. Small changes are best at first.

**Begin to give of yourself.** Giving to others can bring you the greatest joy. It is healing.

**Expect relapses.** There will always be certain things that trigger sadness again. This is normal.





## Journal Writing A Means of Coping and Growing

Identify as many feelings as you can that you have experienced today. You may have coped with grief, anger, loneliness, guilt, relief, denial, confusion, weakness, nausea, a heavy chest, sleep disturbance. All of these, by the way, are normal.

Take a memory trip with your loved one through one event that you can remember clearly. Write about it in detail as you fully experience the memory. Do not be afraid to feel.

List as many “losses” — other than the current crisis — which you have experienced in your life. How were they similar and how were they different? How did you cope with them?

Write about the person who has most supported you since your loss. When finished, write that person a note of gratitude.

Write about the persons who have pulled away from you since your loss. Explore why. Who have you pulled away from and why?

Take out a favorite picture of the person who died. Write about the things you appreciated most about that person. Then write about how you feel now.

Write about some of the things that you are angry about in relation to your loss. Write about how you can express those feelings rather than holding them in.

Write about guilt that you feel, if any. This may include “should-haves” and “if-onlys.” Check for yourself what is rational, and mark out what is irrational. Then write a letter to yourself extending forgiveness.

Write about your fears. These may include being alone, driving a car, money issues or your future.

When you are ready, you may want to write about one thing that you plan to do as you transition to your new life. Examples of these actions are taking off a wedding ring, putting up or taking down a picture, and giving away clothes or other things. Write about how you think it will feel to do this.



## DAILY PRACTICES FOR REDUCING STRESS

Breathe deeply.

Stretch gently.

Close your eyes.

Clench your fists and then relax them.

Laugh.

Take a break between tasks.

Learn to ask for help.

Realize it may be okay to say no.

Put yourself at the top of your list of priorities.

Practice doing one thing at a time.

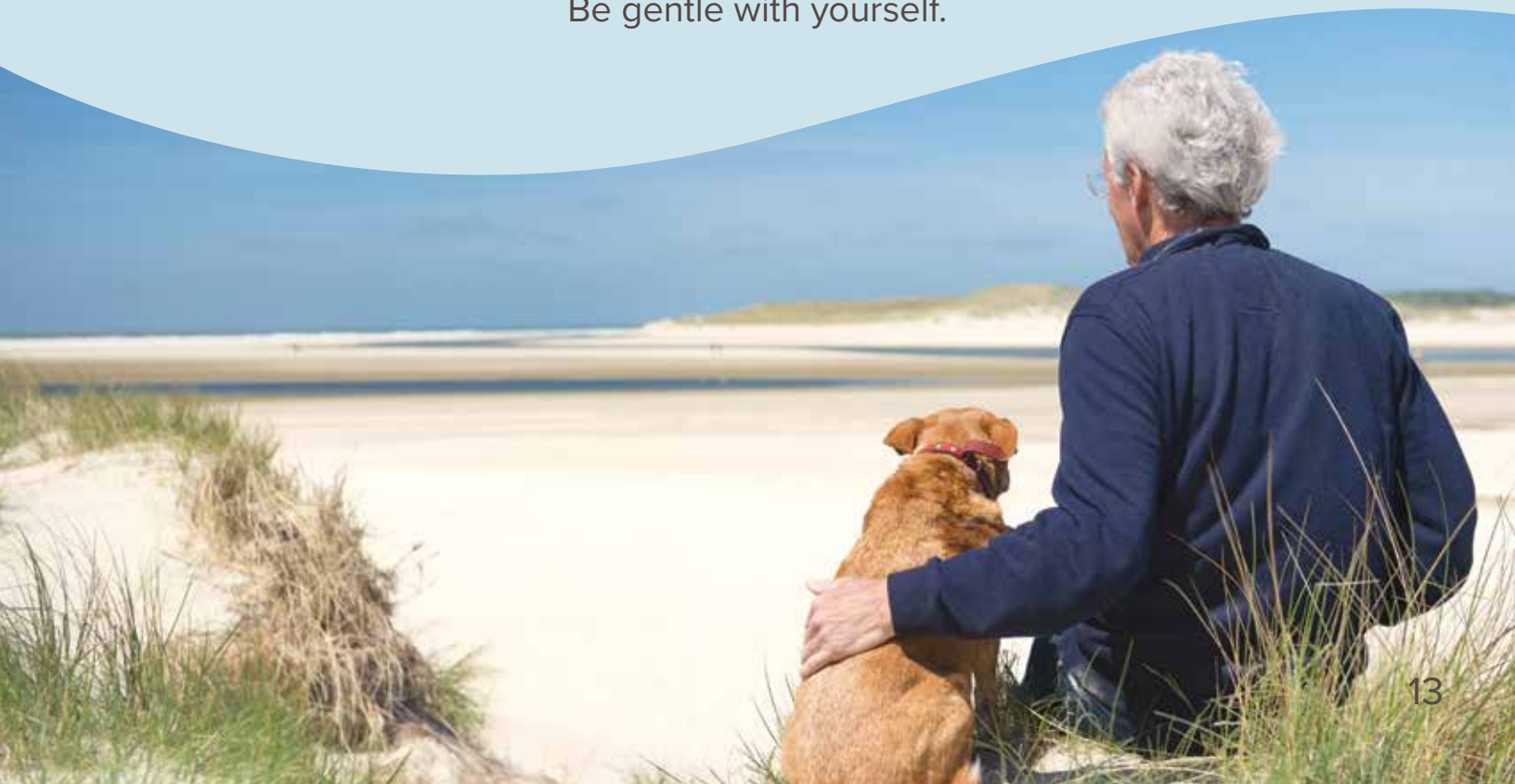
Know that it is okay to feel what you feel.

Find a safe place to talk about your feelings.

Reacquaint yourself with spiritual values and support.

Listen.

Be gentle with yourself.





# Grief Support

Finding your way through the often painful emotions and changes that arise during the days, weeks, and months that follow a death can be difficult. You don't have to do it alone. Hospice of Santa Cruz County has helped thousands of people effectively grow through their experience in grief. All services are offered in English and Spanish.

## Here are some of the ways we can help:

**Individual Grief Support** provides an opportunity for emotional support, sharing of feelings, and education about the grief process and ways to cope with loss.

**Grief Support Groups** allow you to learn about grief, share feelings, and meet others going through loss. We have several groups tailored to specific loss as well as periodic workshops that provide an outlet to grow through loss.

**Drop-In Grief Group** meets Fridays in Scotts Valley and Watsonville.

**Youth Grief Support** individual and group support for children and teens. Young people receive age appropriate support and tools to process their grief in a healthy manner.

**Support to Schools** Classroom presentations on grief and loss. Support to the school community when a death occurs.

**Support in the Workplace** for coping with death or anticipated death.

**Camp Erin© Santa Cruz** a weekend long camp experience for any child or teen, ages 6-17, grieving the loss of someone special. Campers participate in fun, traditional camp activities combined with grief education and emotional support, led by expert bereavement professionals and trained volunteers. Camp is free for all campers.

## Referrals to other community resources:

**Books** The following websites specialize in books about loss and grief. They include helpful descriptions for selecting appropriate books for different types of loss and different age groups.

[compassionbooks.com](http://compassionbooks.com)

[centering.org](http://centering.org)

Additional Resources can be found on our website [hospicesantacruz.org](http://hospicesantacruz.org)

You do not have to receive other hospice services to take part in our grief support programs. **Call us at (831) 430-3000** and find the right option for you.



Sadness slips in unannounced until without warning tears fall.  
Sometimes joy is the same way and we catch ourselves smiling  
and feeling the warmth of the sun even on a cold winter day. And we  
grab hold and our hearts dance and hope is reborn and we go on.

D. KOSMER







# HOSPICE

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