

# GRIEF:

9 Things I Wish  
I Had Known



GARY ROE

*Grief:  
9 Things I Wish I Had Known*

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## HI. MY NAME IS GARY.

Loss is tough. Grief is challenging.

If you're reading this, I assume that you've experienced a painful loss of some kind. I'm so sorry. I'm here to help, if I can.

Allow me to introduce myself.

My name is Gary Roe. I'm an author, speaker, and grief specialist. I've spent the last 35 years helping hurting, wounded people recover, adjust, heal, and grow. It's a great honor to do what I do. I'm humbled and thankful.

I experienced loss early. I lost large chunks of my childhood to sexual abuse. I was bullied frequently at school. Both of my grandfathers died early, and one of my grandmothers never knew who I was due to dementia. My parents' marriage was volatile, and anger filled our home. Over a number of years, my mom slipped into mental illness.

Family friends and relatives died. I recall hiding behind the couch in our living room so I could be a part of these adult discussions. The atmosphere of grief at these times was palpable and heavy.

When I was 12, a good friend died suddenly of an illness over Christmas break. I sat right behind him in homeroom and spent the remainder of that school year beginning my weekdays staring at his empty desk. My parents' relationship fragmented further. They separated and divorced.

I lived with Mom. She grew increasingly delusional and had to go into psychiatric care. I moved in with Dad. We had a great

six months together. One day he dropped in front of me of a heart attack. He never regained consciousness. When the time came, I nodded my agreement to turn off life support. Dad died a few hours later.

Mom moved in, but she was even worse than before. She attempted suicide and was again placed in psychiatric care. I lived alone for six weeks before a friend and his father showed up at my door and asked me to come and live with them.

Mom was released from inpatient care and gave her permission for me to live with my friend's family. I packed up my stuff and we headed over to their house. When they answered the door, Mom smiled and said, "Here's Gary. I'm going to Vegas." Stunned, we watched her drive off. It was years before I saw her again.

I sighed and looked sheepishly at my new family. They marched out (all six of them), hugged me, grabbed my stuff, and ushered me into my new life.

I was 15.

### **My pain became my mission.**

I remember thinking, "If this is what life is, I'm not sure I'm going to make it."

The next thought was something like, "I can give up, or I can fight."

That eventually morphed into, "I must find a way to handle the hits that come. And not only handle them, but turn them around and use them for good somehow."

I set out on a mission to recover, heal, and grow. Along the way, I found myself surrounded by other hurting, wounded people.

More losses came. Small ones and large ones. Some were devastating. All were life-altering in some way. I kept meeting more people struggling with their losses who were looking for hope and healing. I found myself connecting with these fellow grievors and serving them.

And as I served, I learned. I recovered some, healed, and grew - emotionally, mentally, spiritually (and even physically). It's been said that our greatest pains in life inform our mission. I guess it's no surprise I've become passionate about helping hurting, grieving hearts heal and grow.

**Things I wish I had known...**

Over the last four decades, I've walked with thousands of individuals, couples, and families through the valley of loss and grief. Commonalities and patterns have emerged. Even though each person and loss are unique, we all tend to experience some of the same things.

I wish I had known these things when I was fifteen, or even earlier. But of course, if someone had told me, I might not have listened. It's typically only after we experience a heavy loss that we seek answers.

Based on what I've personally experienced and all that I've heard from others, there are nine things every grieving person should know. This is not an exhaustive list, of course, but it's a start.



## #1: GRIEF IS AN EMOTIONAL ROLLER COASTER.

*“The feelings are so intense. I’m an emotional wreck.”*

—Sally

Grief is emotional. When our hearts get hit, emotions naturally begin to surface.

The two predominant emotions we experience are sadness and anger. We’re also liable to encounter guilt, fear, frustration, emotional confusion, anxiety, panic, and depression.

These feelings can be intense and disturbing.

Emotion starts taking take up more of our internal real estate (our minds and hearts). Feelings hijack us and can seem to control us at times. We don’t feel like ourselves. Most of us wonder if we’re losing it.

Navigating this plethora of volatile, unpredictable emotion is stressful and draining. Many describe it as a roller coaster with many unforeseen twists, turns, rises, and falls. Our hearts are repeatedly bumped, jostled, and thrown about.

The grief roller coaster, however, isn’t over in 90 seconds. It can go on, and on, and on.

If your emotions are all over the place, take heart. This is common. Your heart has been hit. Grief is emotional.



## #2: LOSS PACKS A COGNITIVE PUNCH.

*“I can’t think straight. I feel like I’ve been hit by a truck.”*

—Steve

Grief not only hits our hearts, but our minds as well.

Our minds spin. Our thoughts race.

We’re stunned. We find ourselves staring at walls or out into space.

We walk about in a fog. Our heads feel heavy.

Cognitively, we’re not as sharp. We miss parts of conversations or other key info. We retain less. We’re more forgetful.

We wonder what happened, how, and why. We struggle to make sense of all this. Most things look the same, but everything feels so different.

The rest of the world blazes on as if nothing has happened. This is confusing and surreal. Our world is different now. It’s like we exist in some in-between place. We know what was, but not what will be.

Sometimes it hurts to think. As emotion takes up more space, our minds get squeezed. We can begin to question our sanity.

If you feel like you’re on a treadmill with your mind constantly covering the same ground (over and over again), join the club. This mental upheaval is common and natural.

Loss has profound cognitive impact.

## #3: LOSS USUALLY GETS PHYSICAL.

*“I feel like my body is betraying me. I’m falling  
apart. What’s happening to me?”*

*—Kristi*

Loss taxes our bodies too.

Grief is incredibly draining. We feel the powerful emotional and cognitive impact physically. Our sleep patterns are affected. Fatigue encroaches. Exhaustion begins to brew.

Almost all griever report some kind of physical distress:

- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Stomach issues
- Palpitations
- Chest pain
- Joint pain
- Muscle aches
- Loss of appetite
- Shortness of breath
- Trembling or shaking

## GRIEF: 9 THINGS I WISH I HAD KNOWN

- Respiratory infections
- More frequent colds and minor illnesses

Grief is a form of stress. As such, it suppresses our immune systems. We get run down. We're more physically vulnerable.

Taking these symptoms seriously is important. If we're concerned, we need to get checked out. In many cases, physical exams and tests come back clear. This might be an indication that grief is at work in our bodies.

When loss strikes, it affects our entire being, including our physical health.



## #4: LOSS CAN SHAKE THE SOUL.

*“I’m stunned. I have so many questions. The biggest one is ‘Why?’”*  
—Craig

Loss has spiritual impact. When we grieve, our souls and spirits are deeply involved.

Questions surface.

*Why did this happen?*

*Did this have to happen?*

*Why them?*

*Why me?*

*Why us?*

*Why now?*

*Why this way?*

*Surely someone could have done something. Why didn’t they?*

*Who’s responsible for this?*

*How is God involved?*

*Was this God’s will?*

*Did God do this?*

*Why didn’t God prevent this?*

If we have a relationship with God, it will be shaken somehow.

## GRIEF: 9 THINGS I WISH I HAD KNOWN

That relationship never stays the same. It's dynamic. All relationships are. We're either growing in that relationship, or not.

We all have a faith of some kind. We all believe in something, or someone - even if it's ourselves. Loss and grief rattle most of us spiritually.

You might question things you never have.

You might experience a crisis of faith.

You might feel spiritually numb.

What you believe might get jostled or even upended.

Your soul is trying to make sense of this loss. If your faith system doesn't allow for tragedy, suffering, and loss and have adequate answers for such pain, you might be stretched spiritually in ways you never have been before.

Loss can shake our souls too.



## #5 LOSS ALTERS RELATIONSHIPS.

*“Where did everyone go?”*

—*Courtney*

Loss can have stunning relational impact.

Our life is like a web - a web of relationships. It has many strands, all of which are somehow connected and run in and out of each other. These strands are all unique. They're of different length, thickness, and strength.

When loss hits, the whole web shakes. A strand is severed. The thicker and longer the severed strand, the more impact overall on the web. No matter which strand is cut, the web will not be the same.

A strand has been severed. Perhaps more than one. Your web has been hit. Your world has been altered. Your whole being is involved.

As you grieve in healthy ways, you will heal and grow through this. But you will never be the same.

This loss will affect your relationships. Some will pull away. Some will disappear. Some will draw closer. New people will appear. Your relational web will be impacted.

Loss changes our personal worlds, so it naturally affects our relationships too.

## #6 GRIEF IS LONELY.

*“It’s like I’m in a world of my own. The loneliness is staggering.”*

—Lauren

Every person is unique. Each individual is one-of-a-kind, even if they’re a twin.

Every relationship is unique. There has never been a connection exactly like it before and there never will be again.

Every loss is unique. Each heart, body, mind, and soul are different.

Therefore, each grief process is unique. Yes, there are patterns and similarities, but no two grief journeys are identical.

This makes grief special, and lonely. No one else knows exactly how you feel. No human being knows the intricacies of everything that’s happening inside you.

In addition, we naturally tend to withdraw when we’re hurting. Some of us need more time alone to feel, think, and process. The numbing exhaustion of all this may produce even more solitude.

Life is not business as usual. Loneliness is common in times of loss.

## #7 OTHERS WILL NOT UNDERSTAND AND MAY NOT ALWAYS BE SUPPORTIVE.

*“People don’t get it. All I get are pitiful looks, clichés, and eye rolls.”*

*—Theresa*

Those around you - even your closest relationships - can’t understand all that is happening to you, and they may not always be supportive.

This is a huge pain point for grieving hearts. Because you, your loss, and your relationship with the one you lost are all unique, most other people will not understand what you’re going through. Many can sympathize, and those who have experienced a similar loss can empathize, but no one knows exactly how you feel.

Many people are uncomfortable with grief and emotional suffering. They don’t know what to say, so they end up babbling clichés and platitudes. They don’t know what to do, so they pull away.

Some will be hyper-critical judges.

Others will try to fix you and your pain.

Many will make it all about themselves and give you advice you haven’t asked for.

Still others will silently drift away and evaporate from your life.



## GRIEF: 9 THINGS I WISH I HAD KNOWN

The world suddenly seems cold. It moves on, as if nothing significant has happened. Meanwhile, your heart is broken. Your world, in many ways, has stopped spinning.

And yet, you need good, solid relationships more than ever.

You need safe people in your life. They meet you where you are in your grief and walk with you there. They listen. They accept you as you are. They have no agenda except to love you as best they can. When you're in their presence, your heart begins to relax.

Safe people don't grow on trees, but they're out there. Chances are they're around you right now. Most of them are familiar with loss, pain, and suffering.

How do you find these people?

I've found that safe people attract other safe people. The best way to find safe people is to be one.

See those around you. Become that patient, non-judgmental, non-advice-giving listener. Accept people where they are, as they are. Enter their world and walk with them there, even if it's only for a few moments.

Know that others will not understand. They can't. Some of them may not be supportive either. The challenge is to get around people who are helpful to you and limit your exposure to those who aren't. You need safety and support. You don't need extra challenges. You have more than enough on your plate.

## #8 HEALING HAPPENS SLOWLY.

*“Time is different now. I think I’m making  
progress, but it feels so slow.”*

—Kyle

We somehow think that grief is negative. It’s an inconvenience in our already busy lives. We view it as an item to check off our to-do list. Get it done. Efficiently. Quickly.

Grief, however, takes time. It has no timetable. Every loss and each heart are unique. The adjustment and healing process will be unique too - both in terms of its intensity and its length.

Grief is not a straight road. It’s more like a rocky, meandering path through a thick forest strewn with obstacles. You can’t see very far ahead. You don’t know what’s behind the next tree. Sometimes the path itself seems to disappear. At other times, it seems to double back on itself or go in circles. The journey is full of shocks and surprises.

*“How long will this take?”*

I get this question all the time. The truth is that we may always grieve on some level. When do we stop missing them? When does our love for them cease to exist? If we love, we will grieve.

## GRIEF: 9 THINGS I WISH I HAD KNOWN

Our grief, however, changes over time. As we process our pain in healthy ways, the loss settles into our hearts and minds. Memories that brought only tears and longing begin to bring smiles and gratitude. The mental fog lifts a bit. Our minds become clearer and sharper. Our emotions hijack us less. Our bodies begin to recover.

Grief bursts, however, can happen at any time, anywhere. Our grief is triggered by someone or something, and suddenly we're right back in the throes of intense, powerful emotion. We can feel like we're not making progress, or even like we're going backwards.

These grief bursts are normal and common. The grief is inside us. These sudden bursts are simply opportunities for the grief to come out in a concentrated way. Such expressions of our love and grief are inevitable.

Loss can be powerful and deep. Your heart is complex. Give your heart time. Healing often takes longer than we anticipate.



## #9 WE NEED HELP TO GRIEVE IN HEALTHY WAYS.

*“I tried to do this alone. I began to heal  
when I found some safe people  
and began to trust them.”*

—Stephanie

Grief is lonely. It's private in many ways. And yet, we need people. We're wired for connection and relationship. No one should have to grieve alone.

Ideally speaking, we all need a Grief Recovery Team. We need people around us who are supportive and loving.

At some point in our grief process, we could all benefit from the following:

- **Friends and family** who are safe and encouraging.
- **A physician** we can consult when grief turns physical and we wonder if our bodies are falling apart.
- **People who know grief** and who have walked the road of loss.
- **A mental health or grief professional** we can reach out to for comfort, wisdom, and perspective.
- **A pastor, clergy, or spiritual mentor** we can share with through this challenging time of upheaval and adjustment.

## GRIEF: 9 THINGS I WISH I HAD KNOWN

- **Safe people** we can trust to help us express our grief in healthy ways.

You may not consult or approach all these people, but it's a relief to know they're there if you need them.

Again, we all need alone time, but we also need to stay connected to other people who are helpful to us. Isolation is not our friend.

You're going to need help. Going on your own is not a sign of strength. True strength recognizes the importance of your own heart and naturally seeks support in times of upset and pain.

Isolation is the enemy of the grieving heart. You need good, safe people with you on this journey.



## LEARNING TO GRIEVE WELL IS AN IMPORTANT LIFE SKILL.

When I was in college, my mentor said two things that have become key in my life.

*“Gary, life is a series of losses. It’s not so much what happened, but how you interpret and respond to what happened that makes all the difference.”*

In other words, what happens is important, but how I view and deal with what happened will have more impact than I realize - both on my own life and on those connected to me.

The other thing he said that stuck with me was...

*“It’s not what you did, but what you do next that matters most now.”*

I don’t have to get this right or perfect. Each day is uncharted territory, and I am free to learn. I’m imperfect and will make mistakes.

Over time, my losses and learning have blended to produce a philosophy of life that looks something like this:

## GRIEF: 9 THINGS I WISH I HAD KNOWN

*“Loss will come. How I respond to it matters.  
I will grieve in honest and healthy ways.  
I will surround myself with people who are helpful to  
me and limit my exposure to those who aren’t.  
I will see those around me and serve them from my heart.  
I’ll forgive others and myself quickly.  
I will turn loss into good.”*

Almost every struggle we face in life is a grief issue.  
Most our pain is connected to a loss of some kind.  
Grieving well is one of life’s most important skills.



## IF YOU'RE IN A TIME OF PAINFUL LOSS...

If you want to heal, *grieving well is your new priority*. How you grieve matters, both for you and all those around you.

Loss will affect you emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. Grief is draining and exhausting. The process is unpredictable and has no fixed timetable. Your relationships will feel the impact too.

Take your heart seriously.

Let the emotions come.

Be patient with yourself and others.

Know that others will not understand and may not even be supportive.

Let go of resentments and bitterness. Forgive yourself and others quickly.

Don't try to go this alone. People will make all the difference in your grief process. Get around those who are safe, supportive, and helpful to you, and limit your exposure to those who aren't. Life is not business as usual. Your world has changed.

Life is about overcoming. It's about finding a way to use your grief for fuel to heal, grow, and serve others for the greater good. Figuring out ways to use the bad stuff that happens for good is huge.



*Breathe deeply.*

*Now is not forever.*

*You are not alone.*

*You are not crazy.*

*You will get through this.*

## MORE RESOURCES WRITTEN FOR YOU

Loss is tough. Grief is challenging. We all need help and support. Over the years, I've produced a number of books designed to help guide you through loss, pain, and hardship.

### **If you're hurting from a loss and need a good grief companion...**

Consider *Grief Walk: Experiencing God After the Loss of a Loved One*. A daily devotional with over 150 readings, *Grief Walk* is designed to help you experience the God's presence and love amid the pain of loss.

You also might want to check out *Comfort for Grieving Hearts: Hope and Encouragement for Times of Loss*. This Best Book Award Winner enters your world and guides you through this challenging time.

### **If you've lost a spouse or partner...**

*Comfort for the Grieving Spouse's Heart: Hope and Healing After Losing Your Partner* and *Heartbroken: Healing from the Loss of a Spouse* were written for you. Easy-to-read with brief, practical

chapters, these books are designed to bring comfort, hope, and healing.

**If you've lost a child or grandchild, no matter how or what age...**

*Shattered: Surviving the Loss of a Child* and *Comfort for the Grieving Parent's Heart* were written with you in mind. *Shattered* was a Best Book Award Finalist and has been called, "The most comprehensive grief book out there." One reviewer called *Comfort for the Grieving Parent's Heart*, "A warm, compassionate companion for hearts struggling with this unthinkable loss."

**If you've lost a parent or parents...**

I wrote *Comfort for the Grieving Adult Child's Heart: Hope and Healing After Losing Your Parent* for you. Brief, easy-to-read, deeply personal chapters will connect with your heart as you grapple with losing a mother, father, or both.

**If you've lost someone to suicide...**

*Aftermath: Picking Up the Pieces After a Suicide* was written for you. This book is designed to be a compassionate, informative guide as you walk through the rubble of the confusion, trauma, and devastation of suicide loss.

**If you live or work with teens...**

*Teen Grief: Caring for the Grieving Teenage Heart* is a must-have. Parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, youth workers, counselors, and clergy have given this Book Excellence Award Winner rave reviews.

**If you're tired of feeling misunderstood and wish you had more support....**

*Please Be Patient, I'm Grieving: How to Care for and Support the Grieving Heart* was written both for you and those around you. The Best Book Award Finalist is a perfect gift for those you wished understood you better.

**If you're facing a loss in the future, or know someone who is...**

*Saying Goodbye: Facing the Loss of a Loved One* was written to help prepare your heart and mind for what's ahead. This beautifully illustrated, hardback gift version reads like a warm conversation between friends.

**If you need support, encouragement, and hope in your grief process...**

*Please check out my blog and other resources on my website.* Send me an email. Ask questions. Share. Vent. I'm here to listen and to help. For those who want to go deeper, I also offer *grief / life coaching* on a limited basis.

Again, please be kind to yourself and patient with yourself. Loss is hard. Your heart matters. You matter.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Gary's story began with a childhood of mixed messages and sexual abuse. This was followed by other losses and numerous grief experiences.

Ultimately, a painful past led Gary into a life of helping wounded people heal and grow. A former college minister, missionary in Japan, entrepreneur in Hawaii, and pastor in Texas and Washington, he now serves as a writer, speaker, hospice chaplain, and grief counselor.

Gary is the author of numerous books, including the award-winning bestsellers *Comfort for the Grieving Spouse's Heart*, *Shattered: Surviving the Loss of a Child*, and *Please Be Patient I'm Grieving*. His books have won three international book awards and been named finalists eight times. He has been featured on Dr. Laura, Belief

## GARY ROE

Net, Wellness, the Christian Broadcasting Network, Thrive Global, and other major media and has well over 700 grief-related articles in print. Recipient of the Diane Duncam Award for Excellence in Hospice Care, Gary is a popular keynote, conference, and seminar speaker at a wide variety of venues.

Gary loves being a husband and father. He has seven adopted children, including three daughters from Colombia. He enjoys hockey, corny jokes, good puns, and colorful Hawaiian shirts. Gary and his wife Jen and family live in Texas.

## CARING FOR GRIEVING HEARTS

Visit Gary at [www.garyroe.com](http://www.garyroe.com) and connect with him on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Pinterest

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