



# Grief, Nurturing, Self-Care & Safe Coping Skills for Survivors

Contact your CAASA advocate with any additional questions, concerns or need for more information. Our services are free & confidential. You can also contact our 24/7 free & confidential HOPE LINE at 1-877-362-4612. We are here to help!

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## Turning a Boulder into a Pebble

When you first begin dealing with sexual violence whether you are a family member, friend, community member, or a victim, it is like you've been handed a huge boulder you must carry. The boulder is heavy, and it hurts to carry. You always feel burdened by it. It's always scratching you and hurting your hands and shoulders. Even when you're doing other things, that boulder is always on your mind; you can't just leave it at home. You're always thinking about it.

But, gradually, as you carry that boulder around, it erodes and becomes smaller. It becomes easier to carry, less burdensome. It's still painful and frustrating, but you can focus on other things too. The boulder keeps getting smaller and smaller, as time passes, you work through therapy, talk to other survivors, and tell your story.

Eventually the huge boulder is no bigger than a pebble. It will never go away, but at this size, you can put it your pocket. Every once in a while you feel it, but the pain is manageable. It's still part of you, but it doesn't define you. You can take it out when you need to, to look at it and remember, but you can also keep it hidden from view. You've taken a huge, rocky boulder and turned into a small, smooth stone. You have reclaimed your life.



## Stages of Grief

1. **Denial:** Denial is a conscious or unconscious refusal to accept facts, information, reality, etc., relating to the situation concerned. It's a defense mechanism and perfectly natural. Some people can become locked in this stage when dealing with a traumatic change that can be ignored.
  - think, "This can't be happening."
  - seem to have forgotten the event by acting unfeeling or clownlike.
  - pretend that the event/trauma has not occurred or that everything is "fine."
  - have nightmares
2. **Anger:** Anger can manifest in different ways. People dealing with emotional upset can be angry with themselves, and/or with others, especially those close to them. Knowing this helps keep detached and non-judgmental when experiencing the anger of someone who is very upset.
  - think, "I hate them for doing that,"
  - direct anger outward by blaming others or turn the anger inward blame him/herself.
  - provoke fights and display a hostile attitude.
  - display antisocial behavior, including destruction of property.
  - break rules and refuse to comply with a parent or teacher's wishes

3. **Bargaining/Guilt**: Bargaining is an attempt to postpone something that will inevitably happen or even to negate something that has already happened. A person displaying symptoms of the bargaining/guilt stage of grief may:
  - think, "If I become a better person, maybe he'll get better."
  - bargain with him/herself ("If I promise not to get into any more trouble at school, maybe she'll come back.") or bargain with God ("God, please make this go away. I promise to do anything you ask of me.").
  - display an apologetic attitude.
  - engage in self-destructive behavior.
  - develop somatic physical symptoms such as headaches and stomachaches.
4. **Depression**: Depression is the preparation for acceptance. It is the initial realization of what will happen or already has happened, and it brings with it the full sadness of reality. A person exhibiting signs of the depression stage of grieving may
  - think, "What's the use of even trying anymore?"
  - exhibit sleep disturbance, including sleeping excessively, that may be nonrestorative, and/or have an inability to sleep.
  - worry about the health of family members and self.
  - cry frequently and have a general disinterest in activities.
  - cling and whine.
  - experiment with alcohol and other drugs.
  - experience a drop in grades because of difficulty concentrating.
5. **Acceptance**: Acceptance is the beginning of the end of the struggle. It is a demarcation point for reconciling with the past and progressing into the future. A person showing signs of the acceptance stage may
  - think, "What's done is done. I have to get on with my life now."
  - show increased energy, renewed hope for the future, goal setting, and a return to previous levels of functioning.

This process of grieving may vary between individuals in time, length, and degree. Some individuals may not express every stage or may fluctuate between stages. Most people need help and support to work through the stages of grief. Anniversaries that serve as a reminder of the event may be difficult each year.

To talk to someone 24/7, please call the CAASA Hopeline at 1-877-362-4612 or text "iowahelp" to 20121.



## Coping Strategies

After a traumatic experience, thoughts and emotions can feel overwhelming and confusing. This is a normal part of healing. There are some things that may help you feel more grounded and calm:

Take a deep breath, deep enough to make your belly expand. Inhale very slowly, hold it for a moment, and exhale very slowly. Do this several times when you feel anxious, scared, or sad.

Try to keep your usual eating and sleeping habits. Eating good food and taking care of your body will help you heal.

Remind yourself that you are strong and wise. It's okay if you don't feel brave or strong. You will get there.

Sometimes, it helps to distract yourself. Watch a funny movie. Count sheep. Squeeze a rubber ball. Go for a walk or run. Bake cookies.

Soothe yourself with gentleness and encouragement. Think positive thoughts. Treat yourself with respect and compassion. List your strengths.

If you are feeling anxious or depressed, you can ground yourself in the present. Stomp your feet on the floor to remind yourself where you are now. Look and listen to your surroundings, noticing the colors, the people, the sounds, and the shapes of things. Look at a clock or calendar to keep you connected to the present time.

We hold a lot of stress in our bodies. If it feels safe and comfortable, it may help to get a massage, exercise, or engage in progressive body relaxation.

Let people close to you know about how you are feeling so they can help you, if you want them to. Tell them what you need.

What has helped you cope before? What relaxes you? What gives you strength? What gives you comfort? The things that have given you comfort and support before can help you again now.

If you need someone to talk to, call CAASA at 1-877-362-4612. There is an advocate available to talk 24/7 and it is free and confidential. You can also text "iowahelp" to 20121. Help is available.

