

The Second Year of Grief



“The first year following a grief event is the worst.” That’s what everyone says, right? The first birthday, the first holiday, the first new year spent without the person you miss. And there’s no denying that it’s difficult, in an intense, overwhelming kind of way. Every family gathering or yearly tradition for that first year comes charged with a constant negative awareness that there is someone missing. Oftentimes, people rally—adjustments are made to accommodate, tears are shed, and everyone gathers together, determined to survive the impacts of their loss.

And then that first year is over. The anniversary of their passing finally arrives, and it’s difficult. It’s heavy. But there’s also a finality to it, a feeling of expectation. You’ve gone through the worst part. You made it through the first year. But when you wake up the next day, your grief hasn’t budged an inch. It’s still there. Maybe it’s even worse. But that’s not right, is it? Haven’t you gone through the hardest part? Isn’t this when you should start reaping the benefits of your uphill climb? Yet here you sit, feeling no better at all. You haven’t even plateaued. Such is the experience of many grievers. But the second year is often considered the true Year of Firsts, and it can be difficult to understand why.

WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE FIRST AND SECOND YEAR OF GRIEF?

The time immediately following a death—the First Year—is when you learn how to survive with grief. You have, hopefully, plenty of support from friends and family. People are checking in. You are bracing yourself for newness at every milestone, and you’re getting through it. Not easily, but you’re doing it. And it feels weird. The first year, it’s a weird Christmas. It’s an even weirder birthday. Nothing is as it usually is, and you accept that, because of course it isn’t. Your loved one is gone. You expect things to feel weird.

The second Christmas, however, isn’t so weird. You’ve done it once already. You have a reference point for how Christmas feels without the person you miss. You can do it again. And the reality is, you will do it again. The reality is, this isn’t a weird Christmas. It’s the new Christmas. It’s how Christmas is going to be, not just this year, but every year. Year two is often when reality sets in that your loved one is truly gone, and that this is how life will be, not just for a year, but forever. The shock of grief might have finally worn down, and now you might actually feel their loss more keenly in your body and habits. The more time that passes, the further you will be from the times you had with them. You are now faced with the idea of planning for the future, creating new traditions, and formalizing their absence as the new standard. And that is an entirely different kind of challenge.

If the first year is spent learning to survive with grief, the second year is when you learn how to live with it.

COMMON CHALLENGES OF THE SECOND YEAR

Much of the challenge of the Second Year comes from your own expectations—for yourself, for the pace of your grief journey, for those around you—and the feeling that those expectations haven’t been reached. It can feel like grief should be over by now, and when it becomes apparent that it’s not, that broken expectation can make the grief feel more impactful because it was unexpected.

SO WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

Here are three common challenges that grieverers face in their second year and a few suggestions for what to try.

CHALLENGE

The thought of facing another year like the last one is terrifying. It was the hardest thing you've ever lived through, and now you have to do it again. When will life stop feeling like this? When will it finally get better?

TRY THIS

Reassess your expectations for yourself and your grief journey. Though it feels like this messy, winding road should be over now, that's not really how grief works. You will not wake up one day and be healed just because you crossed off a day on the calendar. There is no "over." There is moving forward alongside grief, learning to accept it as part of your life experience, and maintaining love for a person who isn't present anymore, except within our memory. How long that takes is a difficult question to answer, because it's different for everyone.

Framing your expectations through the lens of acceptance rather than total healing can help ease the impact of grief as you continue forward. It may feel daunting, but the challenges of the Second Year are often different than those of the first. This year will not be just like last year. It's the difference between sailing through a storm one day and drifting on a raft the next: both come with unique challenges, and both are doable, but they are certainly not the same.

CHALLENGE

You feel like you haven't made any progress in a whole year. You're drowning at work and can't bring yourself to do anything about it. You can't decide if you've wasted your time by wallowing, or if your desire to move forward is an insult to your loved one's memory.

TRY THIS

It's hard to look back at such a difficult time, but it's also important to try. Reflect on the past year and write down your accomplishments—really, don't just think about them, pick up a pen and write them down. Maybe you got out of bed, brushed your teeth, paid your bills. Walked the dog. Laughed at a joke. Made it one day without crying.

Or maybe you've done none of those things, and your list is completely different. It still equals accomplishment. That means you've had the motivation to try, even during your most difficult moments. You are a person with dreams, hopes, and ambitions. Those things will come back to you again. You have made progress, even if you don't feel like it. You have the proof right in front of you, written in your own handwriting. And that is exactly what your loved one would want for you—a fulfilling life.

CHALLENGE

You've lost touch with your friends. You can't explain why you don't want to respond to their messages, because you know you're lonely. But you also know they expect you to be yourself again, and you're not sure that's going to happen.

TRY THIS

The people who love you are also grieving, maybe for the person you miss, or maybe for the relationship you yourself had with them, which is changing. It might help to try adjusting your expectations for them as well as for yourself. Remember, they have also lost touch with you. You may even have lost touch with you. Communicate that you're struggling—that way, they know how to manage their expectations—and allow time for everyone to re-establish relationships, knowing the dynamics might shift now that life looks different.