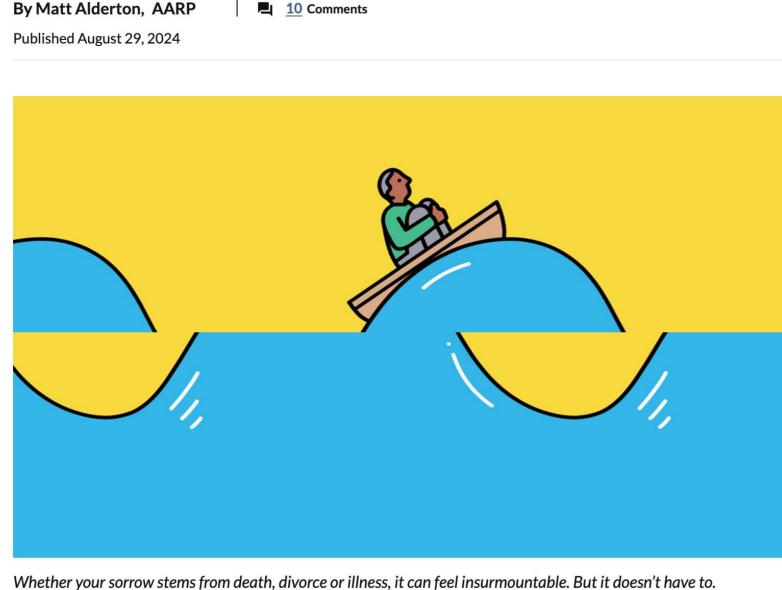
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SAM ISLAND

The older you are, the more likely you are to go through grief and loss. Case in point: Of the 3.28 million deaths in the U.S. in 2022, 2.84 million (87 percent) were among people 55 and older, and 2.43 million (74 percent) were among

people 65 and older, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For many, the pain from a loss is so enduring and debilitating that they end up suffering from prolonged grief disorder, which the American Psychiatric Association describes as "intense and persistent grief that causes problems and interferes with daily life." Whether your sorrow stems from death, divorce or illness, it can feel insurmountable. But it doesn't have to. We've assembled 25 strategies to help you manage feelings of loss and, ultimately, survive them. Consider which ones might be useful for you, then share your own tips at the bottom of the page. **LIMITED TIME OFFER: Labor Day Sale!** Two More Years of Membership. Only \$20 when you switch to Automatic Renewal. Plus, a FREE Gift! Expires 9/10. Pay nothing now and get peace of mind knowing



your benefits continue without interruption. No charge until your current term expires. Terms & conditions apply. Switch Today > 1. Name your grief Hospice and palliative medicine physician BJ Miller likens grief to a disease: To treat it, you must first diagnose it. "I can't tell you how often I talk to people who are feeling out of sorts, and I realize that they're a few months out from a

death in the family or a medical diagnosis or a divorce or some other huge event," says Miller, coauthor of A Beginner's Guide to the End: Practical Advice for Living Life and Facing Death. "To my eyes, it's so clear that they're in grief, but folks often don't see that. So it starts with simply acknowledging grief." Naming your grief helps you make sense of what you're experiencing. "It's almost like an anti-gaslighting phenomenon," Miller says. "No, you're not crazy. You have been feeling weird. And there's a good reason for it." 2. Share your grief Although grief for many people is very personal and private, it's important to

share it with others, says David Kessler, founder of Grief.com and author of Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief. "Grief and trauma aren't healed in isolation ... We need other people," he says. "Grief needs to be witnessed. We need to tell our stories and be seen, heard and valued." That advice is echoed by Alan Wolfelt, director of the Center for Loss & Life Transition and author of Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart. "By sharing your grief outside yourself, healing occurs," Wolfelt writes in literature for grievers that his organization distributes to funeral homes and hospices across North America. 3. Diversify your support system Grief researcher Lucy Hone echoes the importance of social support. "What we know about grief is that your social support system is the No. 1 predictive

## when you need to talk, but also individuals who offer other kinds of support.

informational support (people who can help you with the probate attorney); and memory support (people who can help keep the memory of your loved one alive). 4. Listen to your body Grief isn't just emotional. It's also physical. Studies have found elevated levels of inflammation in bereaved spouses, which increases their risk for heart attack, stroke, cancer and even premature death. As recently as 2023, a study in the journal PLOS One found that widows and widowers were up to 70 percent more likely to die within a year of losing their spouse than similarly aged people who did not lose a spouse. So if you're struggling with loss, it's as important to mend your body as it is to mend your heart, Wolfelt writes. "Your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you fatigued," he says. "Your

without judging," he writes. "Avoid persons who are critical or who try to steal your grief from you. They may tell you, 'keep your chin up' or 'carry on' or 'be happy.' While these comments may be well-intended, you do not have to accept them." That's why the best listeners sometimes total strangers. "Friends and family want to fix our grief because they want us to feel better. But that can make us feel like we're doing it wrong," says Kessler, who suggests connecting with like-minded mourners via in-person or online support groups. Especially helpful are support groups that target a specific gender, age group or cause of death. "For example, someone who's experienced the death of a spouse under 50 has different things to talk about than someone who's experienced the death of a spouse over 70," Kessler says. 6. Stay active Although self-care often requires rest, exercise can be equally as important.

"Grief is exhausting, so the temptation is to hunker down and lie on the couch,"

Hone says. "Without physical activity ... you are making it harder for your mind,

body and soul to recover." In fact, a 2023 study in the journal BMC Public Health

provide an outlet for anger and frustration; create opportunities for pleasure,

found that physical activity can distract you from grief; clear your mind;

enjoyment and socialization; build self-confidence by helping you set and

accomplish goals; help establish positive routines; ease the physical and

emotional symptoms of grief; and enhance your mood.

express your grief as well."

9. Confront your grief In his poem "A Servant to Servants," the poet Robert Frost famously wrote, "The best way out is always through." That's certainly true of grief, according to Wolfelt, who recommends that you "move toward your grief." "Denying your grief will only make it become more confusing and overwhelming. Embrace your grief and heal," he writes. Leder agrees, likening grief to an ocean full of waves. If you try to stand up to a breaker, it will knock you down, toss you around and leave you gasping for air. "The best way ... for most people to deal with an approaching wave is to lie down and let it wash over you," Leder says. "Just float with it until you can stand up again."

**HEALTH & WELLNESS** 

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You can honor your loved one's memory by assemblling a box of of photos and memorabilia. SAM ISLAND **10. Preserve your memories** 

deceased loved one's favorite meal on their birthday, for example — provide a scaffolding you can hang your grief on, according to Hone. She cites the theory of continuing bonds — the notion that actively engaging with the memory of a deceased loved one sustains a connection to them — which studies show are beneficial for the bereaved. "Continuing bonds is about realizing that people can always be present in your world, even though they're not physically here," Hone says, adding that her brother, a yachtsman, died of early onset dementia. "His kids always take a gulp of saltwater for their dad when they're swimming in the sea." she says. "It's those small, private rituals that are deeply personal to you that can connect you to your loved one so you can continue to feel your love for them." 12. Plan for difficult events

Although grief anniversaries and birthdays can be occasions for healing and

celebration, other events — holidays, wedding anniversaries — might be tainted

with suffering and sorrow. "I usually describe grief as kind of a roller coaster,"

says grief counselor Kenneth Doka, senior vice president for grief programs at

the Hospice Foundation of America and author of Grief Is a Journey: Finding Your

Path Through Loss. "You have good days and you have bad days." If you know in

advance that a day is going to be bad, soften the blow by planning how you'll

spend it. "When I work with clients, I always ask them, 'How are you going to

spend Thanksgiving? And what about Christmas?' Don't just drift into those

A study of 13,000 people published in the journal Preventive Medicine in 2022

found that purpose — a sense of direction and goals in life — may be linked to

better health and lower mortality. If you struggle to find purpose after a loss,

the human experience. Most people endure it again and again and again — if

not death, then failure, including lost jobs, missed opportunities and failed

relationships. Although these setbacks are painful, there's an upside, Doka

already demonstrated you can weather difficult storms. And with each

points out: your track record of survival. No matter how bad you feel, you've

successive loss, you become stronger. "If you were a client of mine, the first

thing I'd ask you is: What other losses have you had in your life?" Doka says.

## for." 14. Learn from past losses Unfortunately, loss isn't a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. It's a routine part of

Your altar can be as elaborate as you want, or as simple as a photograph and a candle. SAM ISLAND 15. Create an altar

One way to combine the benefits of rituals and memory preservation is to

it's customary to create an ofrenda to remember loved ones on Día de los

altar can be as elaborate as you want, even something as simple as a

create an altar — a common practice in many cultures. In Mexico, for example,

Muertos, or Day of the Dead, traditionally celebrated on Nov. 1. Although your

photograph and a candle can do the job, according to Miller. "It's just a way to

note or routinize thinking of this person or this being," he says. "For instance, I

landing spot for those feelings of grief that I still have, which can be really

have photographs of animals I've lost or family members I've lost. ... It creates a

16. Write an ethical will

helpful."

The goal is to deescalate your emotions to feel empathy instead of anger. 18. Embrace distractions Eventually, life must go on. You might have work to do, grandchildren to spoil or a garden to tend. That's normal, according to Kessler, who believes distractions are an important part of grieving. "People are worried about distractions because they're afraid it will prevent them from working on their grief," he says. "But distractions are OK in grief. To heal properly, we need to touch the pain, then take a break; touch the pain, then take a break." Known as the "dualprocess" model of grief, researchers suggest that this on-again, off-again approach helps survivors gradually learn to live without the deceased. ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT **Join Free Online Classes** Senior Planet offers free technology classes, fitness programs, and discussion groups. Learn more today! Learn More >

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anniversaries and birthdays," suggests grief advocate Marisa Renee Lee, author of Grief Is Love: Living With Loss. Although these milestones can be triggering, "memorializing our people ... helps keep them alive," says Lee, who suggests marking grief anniversaries with friends and family who share your loss. "Do something to make them smile," she says. "A comforting card, a small gift or a silly meme can go a long way. ... Consider sharing a favorite memory or something you miss about [your] lost loved one." In fact, grief anniversaries and birthdays can be a chance to celebrate your own milestones — to note your progress and healing from one year to the next. "I always tell people, 'Your grief is not a cold or a flu. You don't recover from it. You don't get over it. You're going to learn to live with it," Kessler says.

don't — and even if the funeral is months or years past — writing a eulogy can

help you work through your grief, according to Miller. "It can be almost like a

journaling exercise — a way to get your thoughts out and clarify for yourself

who this person was to you," he says. In some ways, a faux eulogy can be even

more therapeutic than a real one, according to Miller, who recommends writing

Many people feel grief not only about present-day losses, but also about future

Recognizing grief milestones can help you note your progress and healing from one year to the next.

20. Observe grief anniversaries and birthdays

## they get overly polite, which can make you feel like you're in a charade," he says. "Especially if you don't have an audience for your eulogy, use it as a way to get that you need to resolve."

losses — for example, losing a pet or a parent someday, even though they're very much alive today. Miller says this is called "anticipatory grief," and you can use it now to accelerate healing later. For example, consider a couple in which one partner has been diagnosed with a terminal illness. In that case, the couple might process their grief together by sitting with it and talking about it openly. "That is more than some people can handle," Miller says. "But for those who can ... it's a way to be in the moment and for the person who's dying to accompany their loved one in the early phases of their grief." Even if a loved one's death is not imminent, use anticipatory grief to strengthen your relationships and preempt future regrets so that losing them later in life will be easier. 23. Reestablish routines Routines make humans feel secure, Hone says. Grief activates the sympathetic nervous system (your "fight or flight" response), while routines activate the

### 24. Find resilience role models Newspapers, history books and even social media are full of inspiring stories about people overcoming loss and grief. Hone says find the stories and people

world."

sorrow. Hone's own grief work stems from losing her 12-year-old daughter, Abi, in a tragic car crash in 2014. "After Abi died, I met a woman in Cincinnati whose son had also died," she says. "She really inspired me to believe in that first year that I could get through this — that we would be happy again, and that we could learn to live without Abi." 25. Cultivate positive emotions Grieving is defined by negative emotions like sadness, sorrow, regret and pain. To counteract those emotions, Hone says <u>seek out and experience positive</u> ones — things like joy, awe, serenity and curiosity. Hone says positive emotions and experiences can ease the burden of grieving. "Sometimes, people feel guilty

cope with your grief."

quash that emotion," Hone says. "My advice is: Don't. Instead, hang on to it. Amplify it. Know that it is your own evolutionary physiology helping you to

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It's helpful to share your grief with the right people, so choose your audience wisely, Wolfelt suggests. "Find caring friends and relatives who will listen

7. Be authentic Grief can be performative. Mourners often behave based on how they want to be perceived instead of how they actually feel. However, to process your grief, ditch the script and be your authentic self, suggests Steve Leder, senior rabbi at Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles and author of *The Beauty of What* Remains: How Our Greatest Fear Becomes Our Greatest Gift. "If someone says to me, 'Steve, I've never had a good relationship with my mother. She was always

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laugh or cry. In either case, they are a lasting part of the relationship that you had with a very special person in your life." Ideas for preserving memories of a loved one include creating a "memory box" filled with photos, letters and personal mementos that remind you of them; assembling a physical or digital photo album with your favorite pictures of them; making a recipe book filled

with their favorite dishes; sewing a memory quilt or blanket from their used

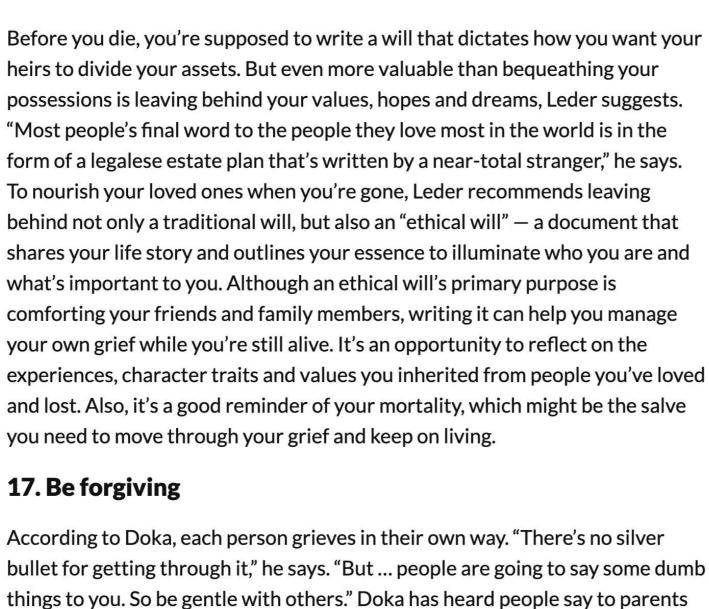
clothing; or crafting memorial jewelry engraved with their name or birthday.

For Wolfelt, memories are among the best legacies of a deceased loved one.

"Treasure them," he writes. "Recognize that your memories may make you

But funerals aren't the only rituals that can help you process grief. For months, years and even decades after a loss, your own custom-made rituals — cooking a

## going and to make the most of this short life we're given," she says. "If you're going to survive your grief, it helps to know who and what you want to survive



who've lost a child, "At least you have three others," and to young widows and

widowers, "You're young; you can get married again." When people say things

like that, ask yourself three questions to help process the remarks. "First, why

did it hurt? Most of the time it hurts because it invalidates our loss," Doka says.

"Second, why did the person say it? Most of the time ... people are trying to be

helpful. Most people are not intentionally cruel. And third, what could you say

in response to somebody, even if you don't actually have the chance to say it?"

19. Control what you can When someone dies, there are papers to sign, bank accounts to close,

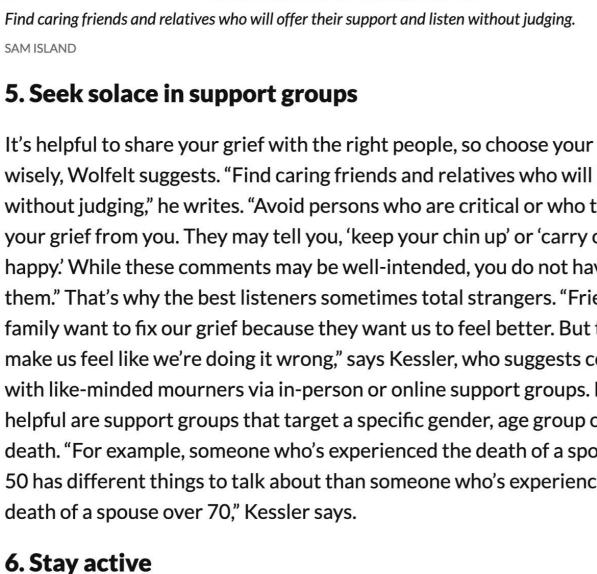
"Whether it's been six months or six years, continue to hold space for grief

# with "radical honesty." "One of the things that goes wrong with eulogies is that

factor of healthy grieving," says Hone, author of Resilient Grieving: How to Find Your Way Through Devastating Loss. "And it's also the No. 1 modifiable factor." However, when you're building a support system, she says it's important to diversify. Your network should include not only good listeners you can turn to

# For example, there's practical support (people who can mow your lawn);

ability to think clearly and make decisions may be impaired. And your low energy level may naturally slow you down. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Caring for yourself doesn't mean feeling sorry for yourself; it means you are using survival skills."



cold and withholding. But now that she's gone, I'm going to have a whole different feeling about her,' I'm going to say, 'I doubt it. More than likely, you're going to be relieved.' And that's OK," Leder says. "We have to grant ourselves permission to be truthful about the dynamics of loss and what loss does and does not change about us." 8. Follow your faith If you're religious or spiritual, give yourself permission to express your faith in ways that feel appropriate to you. "Allow yourself to be around people who understand and support your religious beliefs," Wolfelt writes. "If you are angry with God because of the death of someone you loved, realize this feeling is a

normal part of your grief work. Find someone to talk with who won't be critical

of whatever thoughts and feelings you need to explore." But don't assume that

your faith protects you from grief. "You may hear someone say, 'With faith, you

don't need to grieve.' Don't believe it," Wolfelt writes. "Express your faith, but

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AARP® Dental Insurance Plan administered by Delta Dental **Insurance Company** Dental insurance plans for members and their families View Details > See All Benefits > 11. Develop rituals

It's often said that funerals aren't for the dead, but rather for the living. That's

because it's vital to have a dedicated time and place for mourning. "The funeral

importantly, the funeral is a way for you to express your grief outside yourself."

ritual does more than acknowledge the death of someone loved," Wolfelt

writes. "It helps provide you with the support of caring people. Most

### you might find it in the life of your lost loved one, Kessler suggests. "When people hear the concept of 'finding meaning,' they say, 'There's no meaning in a horrible death.... And they're right," he says. "There is no meaning in the death itself. The meaning is in us; it's in what we do after." Hone describes the search for purpose as a "survivor's mission." "We owe it to our loved ones to keep

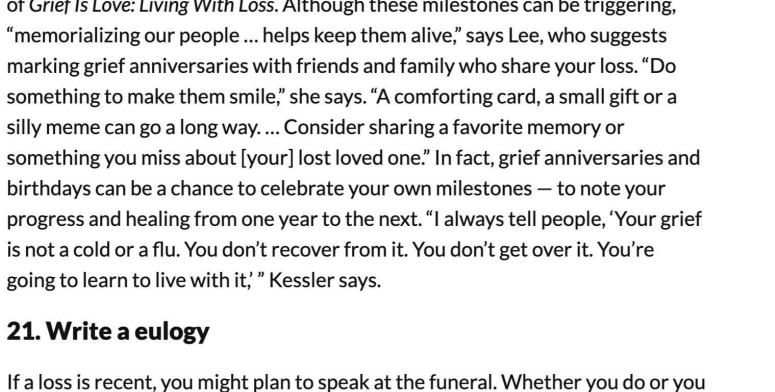
days," Doka says. "Make decisions."

13. Seek purpose

"When you had those losses, what worked for you and what didn't?" If you examine your past and learn from it, you'll be more resilient.

possessions to sort through and on and on. For some, these tasks can be overwhelming and difficult. For others, however, there can be comfort in the clerical aspects of loss. If that's you, getting things done might provide a sense of accomplishment, and that in itself can be healing, according to Miller. "Some of us are wired to feel really good at checking things off of a to-do list," he says. "I don't want to relegate grief to a to-do list, but if you don't know what to do with yourself ... these sorts of tasks give you steps you can follow to automatically move through your day, which sometimes can be really helpful."

JUNE



## everything up and out of you, including any unsavory feelings you might have 22. Anticipate tomorrow's grief today

parasympathetic nervous system (your "rest and digest" response). "When you've experienced a loss, particularly in a traumatic bereavement, your whole world has been smashed apart and nothing makes sense," she says. "You're in a permanent fight, flight or freeze mode. If you put even a semblance of a routine

in place, it enables your body to feel safer — like it's living in a more coherent

# that resonate with you and make them a road map for working through your

about laughing or smiling after a loved one has died, and so their instinct is to

Matt Alderton has written about everything from classic cars and climate change to farming robots and fighter jets for publications such as USA Today, The Washington Post and Forbes. Originally from Denver, which boasts 300 days of sunshine a year, he now resides in Chicago, which boasts three. You can reach him on his website, MattAlderton.com. ← More From Members Edition