



Autism and grief

This information sheet provides an overview of grief in Autistic people and offers practical strategies to help families, educators, support workers and professionals provide the right support.

Grief is a natural way we react to loss. While grief is often associated with the death of a loved one, people may also experience grief following other significant losses, such as the death of a pet, changes in routines, moving schools, losing friendships or changes to important possessions and places.

Autistic people can experience grief just as deeply as non-Autistic people, with the ways in which grief is expressed and processed varying from one individual to another.



What research tells us about Autistic people and grief

There is no “right” or “wrong” way to grieve

- Grief may occur following the death of a loved one, but also after other important losses and life changes.
- Changes that seem minor to others may have a significant emotional impact.
- Autistic people may not show grief in ways that others expect.

- Autistic people may not cry or openly express emotions.
- Autistic people may express grief through behavioural changes such as withdrawal, irritability, anxiety, changes in routine or increased distress.
- Others may prefer to spend time alone, process information privately or focus on understanding what has happened.
- Grief reactions may sometimes appear later than expected or continue for a longer period.

Understanding and information are important

- Many Autistic people prefer clear, factual explanations about death and loss.
- Euphemisms such as “passed away”, “gone to sleep” or “lost” can sometimes be confusing.
- Some Autistic people understand and discuss grief in factual or philosophical ways rather than emotional language.

Our purpose a different brilliant®

Understanding, engaging
and celebrating the strengths,
interests and aspirations of people
on the autism spectrum.



Grief can be misunderstood

- Grief experienced by Autistic people may not always be recognised by family members, professionals or the wider community.
- When grief is overlooked or misunderstood, people may not receive the support they need.
- Recognising and validating an Autistic person's grief experience is an important part of providing support.



Practical tips for supporting a grieving Autistic person

Use clear communication

- Explain death and loss using language that is factual and easy to understand.
- Be prepared to answer questions honestly.
- If you do not know the answer, it is okay to say so.

Respect individual grieving styles

- Allow the Autistic person to grieve in their own way and at their own pace.
- Avoid expecting specific emotional reactions.
- Remember that grief may be expressed through behaviour, questions, withdrawal or changes in routine.

Provide information and predictability

- Explain what will happen before funerals, memorials or other significant events.
- Social stories, visual supports, memory books, photographs and other tangible reminders may help some Autistic people understand and process loss.
- Where possible, maintain familiar routines and provide advance notice of changes.

Acknowledge meaningful losses

- Take seriously the loss of pets, possessions, routines, places or relationships.
- Avoid dismissing these losses because they seem small to others.
- Ask what the loss means to the person and listen to their perspective.

Support rather than fix

- Grief cannot be solved or rushed.
- Sometimes the most helpful response is to listen, validate feelings and be present.
- Allow space for difficult emotions without trying to immediately make them go away.

Additional resources

Aspect a different brilliant® podcast on autism and grief:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=REvipiKEGrg

Grief Australia:
<https://grief.org.au>

Need help?

Your local autism support service, psychologist or counsellor may also be able to provide grief-related support and resources tailored to individual needs.

Based on the idea of a different brilliant®, Aspect's approach:

- Respects difference and diversity
- Builds a person's skills based on their strengths, interests, aspirations and support needs
- Develops autism-friendly environments
- Supports others to understand and embrace autism and to develop respectful supportive interactions.