

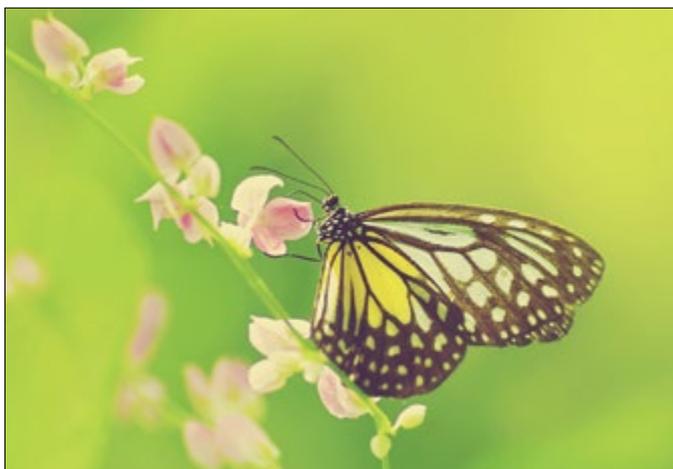
# FINDING HOPE

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## *After The Death Of A Child*

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Prenatal, Child, Teen, or Adult Child Loss



Jason Troyer, PhD

**GriefPlan.com**

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Jason Troyer, PhD

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# Finding Hope

## *After the Death of a Child*

Prenatal, Child, Teen,  
or Adult Child Loss

By Jason Troyer, PhD



*This booklet is dedicated to Charlotte — the daughter we  
never had a chance to meet. You are always in our hearts.  
And to all parents who have lost a child.*



## **To the reader,**

I am sorry that you are reading this booklet because it likely means that a child you love has died. I have written this booklet to provide you with hope and information as you endure your grief — regardless if your child died prenatally, as a young child, teen, or adult.

Let me be clear about what is NOT included in this booklet. I do not tell you that your loss was “meant to be,” and I do not tell you that you “should be thankful for your other children.” I do not try to minimize your loss, nor do I offer unhelpful clichés.

Instead, I talk honestly and openly about grieving the loss of a child. I discuss common reactions to the loss of a child, as well as different challenges faced by parents, siblings, and grandparents. I also share ways to remember and honor your child and sources of information and support. I hope this booklet will be helpful as you mourn.

Sincerely,

*JASON TROYER, PhD*

[www.GriefPlan.com](http://www.GriefPlan.com)

Finding Hope After the Death of a Child *Prenatal, Child, Teen, or Adult*  
*Child Loss*  
Jason Troyer

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This book is not designed to replace information from a mental health professional or a physician. The reader should consult an appropriate professional in matters relating to his or her physical and emotional health.

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# Introduction

As the title of this booklet suggests, hope can be found even after the death of a child. I want to provide you with a realistic, yet hopeful view of the future. Over time bereaved parents often report these four experiences:

- The pain associated with the loss of their child is something that never fully heals.
- The length of “active” grieving lasts longer than they expected.
- Their pain gradually lessens and positive memories replace their grief.
- They are eventually able to find meaning in their life, while never forgetting their child.

If your loss was recent, you may believe your pain will never ease. Your challenge is how to deal with the present. Here is a condensed version of my best advice for dealing with your current grief:

- Participate in grief rituals that are personalized and meaningful to you.
- Allow time to experience your grief, but time for distraction can also be healthy.
- Share your grief with loved ones.
- Do not be afraid to ask for help from family, friends, a professional, or a support group.
- Delay making any significant decisions that can be postponed.

Author’s Note: *Throughout this booklet, I direct the information toward bereaved parents. However, the information is also useful for other grieving individuals including siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.*

## The Loss of a Child at Different Ages

The death of any child — whether the loss happens before birth or if your child was an adult — is an extremely painful loss. This section covers some of the specific challenges that arise from the loss of children at different phases of life including prenatal loss, loss of a young child or teen, or the death of an adult child.

### *Prenatal Loss & Stillbirth*

The loss of a child prior to or during birth is an important loss. Do not let anyone suggest that these are not significant losses. Some people incorrectly believe that just because your child was not born yet or lived only a short time after birth that the loss should not hurt or should be resolved quickly. This simply is not true.

Your relationship with your child begins even before your child



is conceived. It begins as hope for having a child — when the child is just a dream for the future. The relationship strengthens upon finding out that your child has been conceived. This relationship grows as you make physical preparations for your child (e.g., buying clothes and

nursery furniture, etc.) and begin the mental preparations (e.g., considering names, planning for the baby’s care, hopes and dreams for the future, etc.).

Other people may not recognize the strength of the relationship you have with your child — even if you were never able to hold him or her in your arms. They try to help by minimizing the importance of your loss by saying things like, “You can have more children,” and “At least you didn’t get a chance to know your baby — it would hurt so much more.” I believe these people mean well.

They are trying to save you from experiencing any grief. But they don't realize that you have been loving your child since before conception, and there is nothing they can say that will take away your grief.

Do not let their comments diminish your relationship with your child or cause you to believe that you are being irrational. Even if the only picture you have of your child is a sonogram printout, even if you never got to hold your baby, this was still your child. It is an important relationship; therefore, your child's death is significant. Give yourself permission to grieve at your own pace and intensity.

Common reactions to a prenatal or stillbirth loss include disbelief, shock, and sadness. Other common reactions include avoidance, guilt, anger, and many others. Later in this booklet I discuss common grief reactions to the loss of a child in more detail.

### *Loss of a Child or Teen*

We never expect a child or teenager to die. The death of a

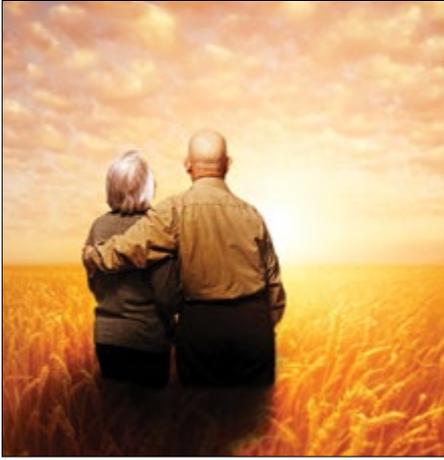


child or teen is the tragedy of a life cut short. It doesn't matter if your child was 2 or 22. You have experienced their unique personality, shared in their successes and challenges, and developed hopes and dreams for them. Your daily life was intertwined with theirs — and when they are gone it leaves a terrible hole.

Although any loss of a child or teen is extremely painful, the loss may be especially overwhelming if it was sudden. You may feel anger or disbelief if your child or teen died as a result of an accident. Other common reactions include sadness, shock, disbelief, avoidance, guilt, anger, and many others. Later in this booklet I discuss common grief reactions to the loss of a child in more detail.

## *Loss of an Adult Child*

Even if your child has grown to be an adult, you still never



expect to outlive them. Unfortunately, some people assume you should not grieve after the loss of an adult child. They may unintentionally diminish your loss by suggesting you have other children upon whom to focus or that “at least” your child lived to adulthood. Furthermore, when adult children die many people focus all of their support on the spouse and children of the

deceased, yet fail to recognize the pain felt by parents and siblings.

The loss of an adult child can create additional long-term challenges. If your child was married, you may struggle to maintain a good relationship with your child’s spouse. If your child had children, you may have to bear the additional burden of helping your grandchildren through their grief and you may be required to help raise them.

Common reactions to the loss of an adult child include sadness, disbelief, shock, and anger. Other common reactions include avoidance, guilt, and many others. Later in this booklet I discuss common grief reactions to the loss of an adult child in more detail.

# Common Questions About Grieving a Child

## *What About the Stages of Grief?*

The most widely known theory of grief is Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's Stages of Grief. Many people assume that her stages (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) are the “right” way to grieve, but this is incorrect. Research and professional experience support the view that grief reactions are very individualized — they do not follow one pattern. So don't be worried if your grief doesn't follow the stages of grief model. Each person's process of grief is unique, and you should not try to match your reactions to any specific stage of grief.

## *How Long Should Grief Last?*

Many people expect grief to be something you “get over” in a matter of weeks. For most people there is a period of “active grief” during which the loss is felt deeply. During this time the bereaved person is often thinking about the loss and experiencing normal reactions such as sadness, distraction, anger, fear, guilt and other responses. For bereaved parents, active grief usually lasts for several months. This grief usually transitions to a period



when the pain of the loss is greatly reduced, yet the child is never forgotten. Even after active grief, reminders of your child may cause “grief bursts” — these are normal reactions and do not signify that you are backsliding or grieving incorrectly.

Although most parents report feeling better several months to several years after their loss, this does not mean that grief necessarily follows a pattern of steadily improving each day. Many people find that grief may peak a few months following a child's death. One possible reason for this is bereaved parents are often well-supported during the first few weeks after their child's death, but the support quickly declines. As you continue to grieve, some well-meaning friends and family members may suggest that your grief should be over. This is unrealistic. Except in extreme cases, you should follow your own grieving timeline.

### *Grief Bursts & Anniversary Reactions*

All grieving parents deal with "grief bursts." Grief bursts are sudden, unexpected events in which you experience a reminder of the pain of your loss. They can be triggered by many different things including your child's birthday, the anniversary of their death, a song, or some other unexpected reminder of your loved one. Even small things, such as driving by your child's favorite toy store or seeing their favorite show on television, can trigger an unexpected reaction.

It is also natural to experience grief as you recognize different milestones your child would have experienced. For example, you may have a grief burst on what would have been your child's first day of school or after seeing a toy that your child loved to play with. It is normal to keep track of how old your child would be and the activities in which they may have participated.

Unfortunately, you cannot avoid grief bursts. After all, your grief is a reminder that you have been separated from your child. The only way to avoid grief bursts is to forget your child – for most people this is neither desirable nor possible. Although they cannot be avoided, please don't let a grief burst cause you to believe that you are starting over at the beginning of grief. They are a frustrating, yet normal, part of transitioning to life after a loss. I hope you will take comfort in knowing that they will subside soon and you

can continue focusing on the positive memories of your loved one.

### *How Do I Achieve Closure or Resolution?*

One of the most common questions I get is “How do I get closure?” I have to admit, I don’t like the term “closure.” I worry that people who think they should have closure after the death of a child assume the goal of grief is to never again feel sadness or pain about their loss. This is not a realistic goal.

Grief doesn’t get wrapped up — it changes, it lessens. But the loss of a child is a life-changing event. No one expected you to “get back to the way things were” after your child was born; therefore, no one should expect this after your child dies. Unfortunately, life will never be like it was before — no matter how much time elapses. Eventually your grief won’t be as intense as it first was, but it is important to begin to accept that life will always be different.



The vast majority of bereaved parents find their grief has lessened within a year or two after their child’s death. However, they also report that their grief is still present just below the surface. Therefore, a reasonable goal is to get to the point where you are not feeling intense pain every time you think about your child.

## Common Grief Reactions

People have a wide variety of reactions to the death of a child. Furthermore, your reactions will likely vary over the months and years to come. Here are several common grief reactions:

- Sadness & Crying
- Guilt & Self Blame
- Helplessness & Shock
- Loneliness & Yearning
- Anger & Irritability
- Fatigue & Lack of Energy
- Insomnia & Restlessness
- Forgetful & Absentminded
- Lack of appetite
- Dreams about the deceased
- Regret
- Relief



## Normal Reactions Following the Death of a Child

There are several common reactions to the death of a child including: Sadness, Shock, Disbelief, Avoidance, Guilt, and Anger. Within certain limits, all of these reactions are normal. Over the next several pages, I will describe these reactions in more detail. If you're concerned that your reactions are not normal be sure to read the section on "Should I Get Professional Help?"

### *Sadness*

Sadness is the most common response to the death of a child. It



is common for sadness to last well beyond the first year. For some people, sadness may generally lessen throughout the year, but others will find that it follows no pattern — more like a roller coaster of ups and downs. Experiencing sadness does not mean that you aren't grieving correctly. However,

your sadness should not be as intense and persistent as it was earlier in the year. If you are concerned that your sadness has deepened into depression, see the section: "Should I Get Professional Help?"

### *Shock*

Other than sadness, shock is one of the most common reactions following the death of a child. Shock is an especially common reaction given that most children die in an unforeseen accident. This shock may last a few hours or several weeks, and it is a normal reaction unless it lasts more than several weeks. Many people don't cry when they are in this state of shock. Let me assure you that not crying in the days and weeks following your loss does not mean that you don't love your child. Do not belittle or ridicule yourself if you

have been unable to cry. It is common for parents to feel like they need to immediately take care of other family members and various responsibilities; you may not have had time to fully experience the loss of your child.

### *Disbelief*



Because parents never expect their children to die before them, it will take your mind some time to fully understand this loss. Most bereaved parents will experience some “disbelief” reactions that are a normal part of the early grief process. These moments of disbelief typically occur in small ways. For example, you

may find yourself thinking about making vacation plans before remembering your child is gone. Or you may begin to think about buying clothes to get ready for the school year only to realize that this isn’t necessary. These momentary “lapses” are common, and they are not indications you are avoiding your loss. These are normal reactions to the death of a loved one, and they may happen for many months.

### *Avoidance*

You may find that you want to avoid thinking about your child after their death. This is also normal. It is unhealthy and unhelpful to either constantly think about your child or to always avoid thinking about them. It is normal and healthy to take breaks from your grief. You deserve to have time to focus on yourself, your other loved ones, and the practical challenges that you now face. It does not mean you love your child less, and it does not mean you are grieving incorrectly.



### *Guilt & Anger*

Guilt is also a frequent reaction following the death of a child. Parents may ask themselves questions such as “What if ...?” “If I had only ...” and “Why didn’t I ...?” These questions are very common and normal. There was likely nothing you could have done to prevent your child’s death.

It can be difficult to let go of feelings of guilt. I would simply ask that you show yourself at least as much patience and grace as you would show a friend who is grieving. For example, I assume if your closest friend was grieving the death of her child you wouldn’t tell her, “Well, if you had just taken better care of him, he wouldn’t have died!” Give yourself at least as much kindness as you would show others.

Grief may be expressed as anger. Sometimes it is easier to be angry than sad. When a loved one dies, we’d often like to think there is someone who should be at fault. This may be especially true when the death is sudden, unexpected, and involves an accident or intentional harm. Of course in some cases, like a negligent surgeon or a drunk driver, your anger will be completely justified.

To heal anger, one must first determine if it is justified or unjusti-



fied. You must ask yourself who you are currently angry with and whether or not it is fair to be angry with them. Furthermore, is it fair to continue to be angry at them? But perhaps the most important questions are: What is the anger doing for you? What purpose is it serving? Anger can be helpful. It may drive you to make changes like starting a charity in your child's

name or getting a law changed. But anger can only help at the beginning of these changes. It cannot be used to maintain these causes because anger is too destructive to the survivor if it is maintained over a long time. Anger can only be healing if it has been transformed into a desire to help others; eventually charity, grace, and altruism must replace anger as the primary motivators.

Some bereaved people are afraid to give up their guilt and anger. They mistakenly assume that if they are no longer experiencing guilt or anger they will begin to forget or dishonor their child. This simply isn't true. You can continue to honor and remember your child without the self-destructive effects of long-term guilt and anger. After all, do you believe your child would want you to live the rest of your life consumed with guilt and anger? Or would they want you to remember and honor them, but also enjoy your life? I know that giving up guilt and anger is easier said than done, but I hope you find you can honor your child's legacy without the ongoing burden of guilt and anger.

## Supporting Your Spouse & The Divorce Myth

The loss of a child will likely be one of the most stressful



experiences of a parent's life. Recognizing that bereaved parents vary in how they express their grief and how long they experience "active grief" can make it easier to support one another. For example, some women grieve primarily through expressing their sadness and sharing their

feelings and memories with others. Some men grieve through taking care of family and friends, performing physical tasks, and experience their grief by thinking about it. Sometimes these patterns are reversed and men will cry and talk while women will be more cognitive and physically active.

Differences can also be seen in how long active grief lasts; one parent may want to share and talk about their grief significantly longer than the other. These differences in grieving styles can also apply to surviving siblings or other people who are affected by the loss of the child.

Experiencing grief differently does not make either parent's grieving style better or worse. For example, expressing feelings and discussing grief does not mean a parent is weak or grieving incorrectly. Conversely, keeping your feelings to yourself does not mean you are unmoved or unaffected by the loss. As with any other difference, it is important to openly discuss your concerns with your spouse. But I would encourage you to begin with the understanding that it is normal for parents to grieve differently. If one parent is not getting the support he or she would like, seeking a mental health professional or a support group may be an ideal way to receive the needed assistance.

There is a pervasive myth that bereaved parents are at a significantly higher risk for divorce. This myth is based on a book from the 1970s that estimated and assumed that bereaved parents would be more likely to divorce. Recent research on actual bereaved parents has clearly shown that bereaved parents are significantly less likely to divorce than the national average. Of course, parents who experience a child loss will need to work hard to support and understand one another's unique grieving style and needs. However, the vast majority of married couples who experience the loss of a child remain married.



## Helping Grieving Children & Teens

Unfortunately, bereaved siblings and other grieving children are often overlooked and undersupported. They may feel as though they are competing with their deceased sibling for their parents' attention, and they may worry that their own life will be cut short. Furthermore, children of various ages will understand death differently.

### *Helping Children after a Death*

The most important rules for helping grieving children are: (a) be patient, (b) provide accurate information, and (c) show them how to grieve and talk about the deceased.

### *Be Patient: GRIEF IS A NEW EXPERIENCE*

Most adults have experienced some type of loss before. Adults also have more tools and resources for dealing with their grief. Children don't have these advantages. Depending on their age, children may not completely understand the reality of death. They

are often confused, scared, and in emotional pain. They are unsure how to express their grief and may feel embarrassed asking for help. Bereaved children can benefit from role models and patient adults.

### *Provide Accurate Information*

Well-meaning people often insulate children from death. This is done with the best of intentions and the hope that not talking about death will somehow shield the child from sadness and grief. Let me be clear: Talk to children about death. Ask them if they have questions and answer them as honestly as you can.

Use words that are clear and concrete. Many adults try to



protect children from the topic of death by not using terms such as “dead,” “deceased,” and “died.” Avoiding these words will make it more likely for the child to confuse death with sleeping (a common mistake children make) or other

concepts. Gently correct children if they are using inaccurate terms like resting, sleeping, or gone away, but do not force children to give up softer, yet accurate words for death like “in heaven” or “passed away.” If you gently use clear, unambiguous terms, children will eventually adopt them.

Children are curious and will often want to know why or how the child died. It can be helpful to explain, in an age-appropriate way, the reasons why someone died. Always ask children if they have any questions and reassure them that they can come to you with questions later. Again, be sure to use clear terms to avoid unintended misconceptions. If you do not provide children with information, they will come up with their own explanations. The child, using his or her “creative logic,” may conjure up concepts and causes that are much more traumatic and frightening than the truth.

## *Show Them How to Grieve & Talk About the Deceased*

Like many other life skills/behaviors, children will learn how to grieve by watching others — especially their parents. If a child never sees adults grieve or never hears the name of the deceased, they will assume that it is not appropriate to express their own grief. This does not mean that you should share all your grief with a child. There is a balance between letting children see you express your sadness and grief and not overwhelming them with your grief.

Maintaining some pre-loss patterns can help reestablish a sense of stability. For example, returning to regular family dinners and the resumption of some of your child's activities (e.g., sports, clubs, etc.) can be helpful. You should certainly talk about the deceased child and use their name. Sharing spontaneous memories and telling stories is a great way to show surviving children that it is normal to remember and miss the deceased.



I provide more detailed information about helping grieving children and teens in a different booklet: *Finding Hope: Helping Children & Teens Before & After the Funeral*. That booklet discusses these topics in more detail:

- How can adults assist children during times of grief?
- Should children and teens attend the funeral? If so, how can I prepare them?
- How do children and teens understand (and misunderstand) grief at different ages?
- What are common grief reactions for children and teens?
- What are helpful ways children and teens can express their grief?

## Should I Get Professional Help?

First, you should always seek professional assistance if you think it would be helpful to you. Even if it has been months or years since your loss, you can still take advantage of a support group or counseling. You certainly don't have to be "crazy" or mentally ill to benefit from these forms of support. Mental health professionals can provide an unbiased perspective and can help you develop strategies for becoming "unstuck" in your grief. Grief counseling is not a magic potion or a cure for your grief; you won't walk out of your sessions feeling as though your grief has disappeared. But professional assistance can help you better understand your grief and can provide a safe environment for talking about your concerns.

### *Signs You May Need Professional Help*

- You feel that you are "stuck" in your grief in some way
- Your grief has not lessened (or has gotten worse) after several months or a year
- Your feelings of guilt and/or anger have not diminished
- You can't say your child's name or you won't allow others to talk about them
- You experience grief, depression, and/or anxiety that impairs your ability to take care of yourself, be effective in your work, or maintain your relationships with others
- You experience thoughts of self-harm or suicide (Always seek help in these situations)
- Your use of alcohol, medications, or illegal substances impairs your ability to be a fully-functioning person

*\*All of these signs (with the exceptions of thoughts of self-harm or substance abuse) refer to your situation several months after the loss — not immediately after your child's death.*



## Honoring & Remembering Your Child

I encourage you to use public and private rituals to honor and remember your child. I use the term “rituals” to signify any action a bereaved person may use to express love, honor, or remembrance. These actions do not need to be religious, although they may be. Rituals help us express our love and grief when words may fail. They can be customized to be meaningful and can be an opportunity to experience support from others.

There are many different ways to honor and remember your child, but the best ways are those that are meaningful to you and your loved ones. Think about what was important to your child – his or her interests and unique personality. But most importantly, consider what would be helpful for you as you grieve your child. Below are some ideas to help you begin thinking creatively about ways to honor and remember your child.

1) *Create a photo album, scrapbook, memory book, video montage, or other visual way to remember your child.*

Creating a visual reminder of your child can be a wonderful way to honor them. Many people find great comfort in reviewing pictures of their child as a way to remember the happy and important moments of life. If your child had art work, certificates, or other items, you can take pictures of them and create an electronic scrapbook. Although it may seem morbid to some parents, others

find that recording and reviewing the funeral service can be helpful. If you think this may benefit you, be sure to have the funeral home record the service.

*2) Volunteer for or contribute to an organization whose mission you support*

Many grieving people find it necessary to do something active as part of their grief response. They feel the need to “do something.” Volunteering at an organization that was meaningful to your child can help you feel a connection to them. You can also share your time or money with organizations that help children (Child Advocacy Centers, Boys and Girls Clubs, St. Jude’s Children’s Hospital, etc.) as a way to honor your child’s legacy.

*3) Keep a special reminder with you*

Parents (as well as grandparents and siblings) may feel extremely lonely after the loss of a child — this is a natural reaction. It may help you to carry a reminder of your child. For example, you might carry a picture, a significant piece of jewelry (e.g., pendant or ring with your child’s fingerprint, etc.), or another item as a way to continue to feel close to them. Let me assure you that there is nothing pathological or unhealthy about doing this.

*4) Ongoing Rituals and Moments of Significance*

There are many ways that you can continue to feel connected to your child. Examples of daily, weekly, or monthly rituals include saying “good morning” to your child’s picture as you get ready for the day, including them in your daily prayers, releasing balloons on their birthday, visiting their gravesite or other important location on a regular basis, and many other possibilities. Just as your relationship with your child was built upon many daily interactions, so too can your connection be maintained with small, but significant moments of remembrance.

## A Final Word of Hope

While no words can take away your grief, I hope this booklet has provided you with information and comfort. I want to remind you that grief takes many forms and it may resurface at seemingly random times. While you may currently believe that your pain will never end, bereaved parents report that they are eventually able to find meaning and joy in life.

My hope is that you are surrounded by supportive loved ones as you grieve the death of your child and that eventually your happy memories replace your current pain.

With sincerest condolences,

*JASON TROYER, PHD*

[www.GriefPlan.com](http://www.GriefPlan.com)



## About the Author



Dr. Jason Troyer is the creator of [GriefPlan.com](https://www.griefplan.com). In his professional experience as a therapist, grief researcher, and professor, he discovered that grieving people wanted a plan to help them on their grief journey. His GriefPlan Programs include videos, information, activities, writing prompts, and other tools to guide people to heal, remember, and rebuild after loss. Dr. Troyer also offers 1-on-1 GriefPlan Coaching for those who want additional help. He provides engaging presentations and workshops on a variety of grief-related topics. Dr. Troyer earned his doctorate in Counseling Psychology and masters in Counseling. You can contact Dr. Troyer at [GriefPlan.com](https://www.griefplan.com).

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