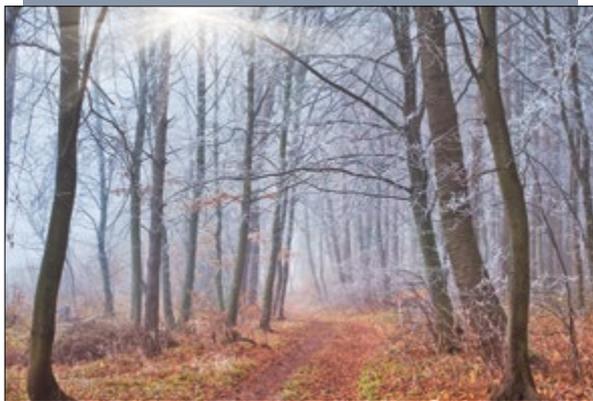


FINDING HOPE

After The Death Of Your Parent

MEN'S EDITION



Jason Troyer, PhD

GriefPlan.com

Heal • Remember • Rebuild

With Dr. Jason Troyer



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Jason Troyer, PhD

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Finding Hope

*After the Death
of Your Parent*

MEN'S VERSION

By Jason Troyer, PhD



To the reader,

I can't express how sorry I am for your loss. Most men find the death of a parent, even if it was expected, to be challenging. I wrote this booklet to provide you with comfort, hope, and information following the death of a parent. I have included information about common grief reactions and responses, strategies for helping yourself, and other topics. I have even more information listed on my website: www.GriefPlan.com.

I hope this booklet will be helpful to you as you mourn the death of your parent.

Sincerely,

JASON TROYER, PhD

www.GriefPlan.com

Finding Hope After the Death of Your Parent - Men's Version
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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David's Story

This brief story is a combination of several men's experiences. I'm sharing it with you as an example of some of the reactions you may be experiencing. All of David's reactions and responses are completely normal following the death of a parent.

David considered his family and childhood to be fairly normal. He had grown up with his parents, a younger sister, and younger brother. David's mother had initially stayed home to be with him and his siblings, but quickly returned to work when they started school. His father's job kept him on the road frequently, but he was able to help coach David's junior high basketball team. His relationship with his parents wasn't perfect — there had been a particularly rough stretch when they didn't talk for almost a year when he decided (against their wishes) not to apply for college. He had always loved his parents, but there were times when he could feel the difference between their generations and their views on life.

After getting married, David had moved a few hours away and had three children of his own. As his family grew and his children had more and more activities, the trips and phone calls to his parents' house had become less frequent. But over the last few years David had been making more trips to see his parents, especially after his father had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. David and his siblings had struggled through many decisions: when to tell their father he could no longer drive himself and when it was time for their mother to either get professional assistance or move their father into an Alzheimer's facility. David and his siblings agonized over these decisions and David had even considered trying to move back to his hometown.

David wasn't too surprised to get a call from his sister telling him their father had died. But he was shocked when he got another call saying his mother had died a day later from a stroke. David had a variety of reactions after hearing about his parents' deaths. On one hand, he was relieved his father was free from the grip of

Alzheimer's. It had been terrible to see his father quickly lose his most precious memories; in the last few months he hadn't even recognized David when he would visit. He was also relieved his mother would no longer have to worry about taking care of his father. Her caregiving burden and the guilt associated with moving his father into a facility had been terrible for his mother.



In addition to his relief, David found himself being frustrated at his mother for not taking his advice and moving his father into a facility sooner. He worried that the stress of trying to live in her own home and also take care of her husband had caused her to die prematurely. He was upset that his father had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and that it had robbed his parents of enjoying their golden years. He even felt angry with his father for having the disease, even though he knew his anger was misplaced and irrational.

Most of all, David felt sadness. He was sad his parents would not see their grandchildren graduate. He was sad he wouldn't be able to have a late night conversation with his father on the back porch and wouldn't eat another one of his mother's homemade cinnamon rolls.

David and his siblings decided to have a visitation and a joint funeral service for their parents. David was initially dreading these events. However, he learned so many new things about his parents. It was especially important to hear from people who had known his parents when they were young. David's parents hadn't often told stories of their childhood years, and David found himself laughing at stories of his mother being mischievous in school and his father at his first job. It was heartwarming to hear how they had been an important part of so many peoples' lives. After the visitation, David and his siblings gathered at their parents' house and continued to tell stories of their childhood and their mother and father. Many of the stories hadn't been told in years, and it was fun to have each sibling fill in the forgotten details.

Sitting in the funeral the next day made everything feel so final. David and his siblings took specific steps to personalize the funeral. They placed a bouquet of white roses, the same style of bouquet their mother carried at their wedding, on each of the caskets. David's younger brother read their parents' vows from their wedding, and almost everyone, including David, had a good cry. In many ways, it felt natural that his parents would share a funeral after being married for 54 years.

After the funeral, David faced many new challenges. As the executor of his parents' estate, he had to sign many documents and deal with numerous financial and legal matters. David was fortunate to have a trusted attorney to help with the more complicated legal issues because he found it so difficult to concentrate on anything. David often found himself distracted and daydreaming during the business and legal meetings.

Some of the biggest challenges David faced were the day to day experiences when he was reminded that his parents had died, like when he saw a game score for the Chicago Cubs on TV and remembered they were his father's favorite baseball team. He almost broke down crying as he was walking through a gift store and saw a salt and pepper set that were crafted to look like angels. His mother had

had a huge angel figurine collection. “I must be losing it,” he thought to himself as he rushed out of the store.

David discovered there were consistent times when he missed his parents. He often thought about them before one of his children’s dance recitals or athletic events. David had always recorded these events and then posted them on a private internet site so his parents could watch their grandchildren. He could remember one time when his mother scolded him because he was slow to post the videos.

About three months after the funeral David found that he was still thinking about his parents daily. Sometimes he wondered if he should be “getting over” his parents’ deaths by now and if he was doing something wrong.

To see how David deals with these adjustments and his grief, read the Epilogue.



Common Grief Reactions

People have a wide variety of reactions to the death of a parent. Furthermore, your reactions will likely vary over the weeks, 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 Grief Reactions following the Death of a Parent

Shock: Other than sadness, shock is one of the most common reactions following the death of a loved one. Many adults go through a period of shock after learning a parent has died; others may have been anticipating the death due to their parent's illness. This shock may last a few hours or several weeks, and it is a normal reaction unless it lasts for more than several weeks. The shock may be less if you have already experienced the death of a parent — but various factors can influence this reaction. Many people don't cry when they are in this state of shock — this is even more common for men. Let me assure you that not crying in the days and weeks following your loss does not mean that you don't love your mother or father. (On the other hand, crying after your loss does not make you less of a man.) Do not belittle or ridicule yourself if you have been unable to cry. It is common for adult men to feel like they need to immediately take responsibility for planning the funeral and dealing with legal matters; you may not have had time to fully experience the loss of your parent.

Disbelief: Because your parent has always been an integral part of your life, it will take your mind some time to fully understand this loss. Most adults 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 hear your phone ring and momentarily think, “That's my mother calling” before remembering she is gone. Or you may begin to think about holiday plans only to realize that your father won't be around this year. 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 parent after their death. This is also normal. It is unhealthy and unhelpful to either constantly think about your parent 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 your-

self, your other loved ones, and the practical challenges that you now face. It does not mean you love your parent less, and it does not mean you are grieving incorrectly.

Guilt: Guilt is also a frequent reaction following the death of a parent. Adult children 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 parent’s death.

A common source of guilt is when adult children had to make medical decisions for their parents. These types of decisions are some of the most difficult that an adult will ever face. It is common to second-guess yourself, and it is natural to wonder if you made the correct decisions. I have never met anyone who made these decisions without careful consideration. I am sure you thoughtfully examined all the options and made the best decision possible with the information that was available.

Anger: Grief, especially in men, can often be expressed as anger. Most men are more comfortable showing anger than sadness. When a loved one dies, sometimes we’d 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.

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 parent’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 men 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 parent. This simply isn't true. You can continue to honor and remember your parent without the self-destructive effects of long-term guilt and anger. After all, if your father or mother could talk to you, would they want you to live the rest of your life consumed with guilt and anger?

Relief: There are two common situations when you may feel relief following the death of a parent: when you were a caregiver for your parent or when the relationship was troubled. You may have been caregiving for your parent for weeks, months, or years while they were ill. In these situations it is normal to experience relief — both that your parent is no longer suffering and that you are no longer required to perform caregiving tasks. Some men experience guilt in association with this relief. They convince themselves they are being selfish for being released from their caregiving role and believe they should not experience any sense of relief. As mentioned in the section on guilt and anger, try to recognize that your parent would not want you to be consumed with guilt. After all, your parent has been released from their pain and illness and you should be released from your caregiving duties. This does not mean you don't love your parent or honor your relationship.

The other situation where you may feel relief is when your relationship with your mother or father was troubled and conflicted. Although we are taught not to speak ill of the deceased, the reality of the situation may be that your parent had numerous faults. Perhaps your relationship had been troubled for years or decades. You may have loved your parent, but not liked some of their behaviors. To make things more difficult, others may not have known about your parent's faults, and they may speak of them as being more admirable than they really were. In these situations, it can be incredibly helpful to find a trusted person or professional you can confide in. Some adult children find support among their siblings because they have often experienced the same challenges.

Should I Get Professional Help?

First, you should always seek professional assistance if you think it would be helpful to you. You certainly don't have to be "crazy" or mentally ill to benefit from grief counseling or a support group. 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 parent'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 parent's death*

Common Questions About Grief

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 you don't feel angry or if you don't experience denial. Each person's process of grief is unique, and you shouldn't 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. In fact, your grief may last a year or more and many feel grief even longer than that. Most adults find their grief eventually lessens, but also feel that a part of them is always grieving the loss of their parent.

Although most adults report feeling better several months to several years after their loss, this does not mean that grief necessarily follows a pattern of improving each day. Many people find that grief may peak a few months following a parent's death. One possible reason for this is bereaved adults are often well-supported during the first few weeks after their parent'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.

Furthermore, most bereaved adults have "grief bursts" — moments or days when their grief is especially painful. These bursts of grief may be due to significant days (e.g., parent's birthday, parent's anniversary, holidays, child's birthday, mother's/father's day, etc.)

or random reminders of your parent. These “bad days” can also be a result of a new realization or a new “first.” For example, you may have a grief burst on the day you send out the graduation announcements for your child and realize your parent won’t be there. These reminders may even seem silly to you and others — perhaps the roses in your mother’s garden finally bloomed and you’re upset that she didn’t get to witness it or your father’s favorite sports team finally won the championship that he had waited years to see. Grief bursts are a normal, although painful, part of grief. Most importantly, experiencing them does not mean that you are regressing or that you are not grieving correctly.

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 parent assume the goal of grief is to never again feel sadness or pain about their loss. For most people, this isn’t a realistic goal. While the vast majority of adults find they are

doing well within a year or two after their parent’s death, they also report feeling some grief at times. A more reasonable goal is to get to the point where you are not feeling intense pain every time you think about your parent.

Grief doesn’t get wrapped up. It changes, it evolves, but important losses are life-changing events. We don’t ask newlyweds how quickly they get back to the way they were before getting married; we don’t expect new parents to get back to the way things

were before they had their first child. Why do we assume we will “get back to” life as it was before the death of a parent? Life will never be like it was before — no matter how much time elapses. Hopefully the loss won’t be as intense as it first was, but it is important to accept that life will always be different.

Is There a “Right” Way to Grieve?

HEART GRIEVERS & HEAD GRIEVERS

There are lots of assumptions about the “best” way to grieve. For many years, most people (including psychologists) assumed the only way to grieve was to express feelings of loss through crying and talking. More recently, grief experts have begun to rethink this assumption. In fact, many individuals adapt well by using other methods.

I believe (and recent research supports) there is no one correct way to grieve. There are some common responses, but grief is highly personal and unique. One view of grief that I support is the idea that there are two general styles of grieving: “heart grievers” and “head grievers.” Both ways of expressing grief can be normal and healthy. Heart grievers find comfort in sharing their feelings with others, experience grief very intensely, and express their loss through tears. Most women (but not all) tend to be heart grievers. Conversely, head grievers express their grief through their thoughts and actions, are uneasy crying in front of others, and often focus on solving the problems associated with their loss¹. For example, head grievers may express their grief through taking an active role in planning the funeral, channeling their grief into physical exercise, spending time alone thinking about their loved one, and choosing specific times when they feel comfortable expressing their feelings. Not surprisingly, men are more likely to be head grievers, but some women also identify with this style. I should note that few people fall completely into one category or the

¹ *The concepts of heart and head grievers are based on Ken Doka and Terry Martin’s concepts of instrumental and intuitive grief styles. See their book, *Grieving Beyond Gender*, for more information.*

other, and some people will feel comfortable with both styles (heart and head). Therefore, the best way to grieve is to follow your own natural style.

Do I Have to Forget My Parent?

There is a longstanding grief myth that it is necessary to eventually “let go” or forget the deceased. We now know that this is not a healthy and adaptive way to grieve. Instead, it is healthy and normal to maintain some “continuing bonds” with your parent after their death². These bonds may include thinking about them, talking to them and about them, visiting a gravesite or special place, and other ways of feeling connected to them. I believe these different ways of honoring and remembering your parent can be an important part of the grief process, as long as you balance them with continuing to love those who are still living.

²For more on this see the book *Continuing Bonds* by Klass, Silverman, and Nickman.



Helping Yourself: Practical Strategies

Be Gentle with Yourself

Give yourself at least as much patience and grace as you would give to a friend or loved one who had suffered the loss of a loved one. We are often much kinder to others than we are with ourselves.

Be Open to Opportunities

Many grieving people are hesitant to socialize with others. I would encourage you to accept offers to socialize and be active with others, if you feel like doing so.

Take Care of Yourself

Be sure to eat healthy, exercise, and take care of your physical health. It is common to feel a strange combination of exhaustion and nervous energy, yet also have difficulty falling and staying asleep. Eating well and exercise can help drain some of this restlessness and may help you sleep better.

Express Yourself

It can be helpful to express yourself through creative hobbies or activities. Some examples include sewing, quilting, woodworking, painting, writing poetry, singing, writing stories, or playing an instrument.

Share your Thoughts and Feelings

Setting aside time and space when you feel comfortable talking



with others can be incredibly helpful. This may involve talking with a trusted friend or family member, a clergy person, or a therapist. You may want someone to simply listen or to help you

solve problems. The nature of these conversations may be different if you are a heart or head griever (see Common Questions about Grief section), but regardless of your grieving style, it can be helpful to gain another person's perspective and support.

Read Books about Other People's Responses to Parent Loss

The death of a parent can be challenging. You may not know many other individuals who have experienced the death of a parent, or you may not feel comfortable talking with others. It can be helpful to read about how other grieving people have dealt with the death

of a parent. Books can help you feel less lonely and can provide guidance about how to adjust to life without your parent. I have reviewed numerous books about grieving a parent on my website: www.GriefPlan.com.

Engage in Meaningful Rituals and Activities

Many grieving people find it helpful to create meaningful habits and activities. These actions can be large or small, public or private, and symbolize your relationship with your parent. For example, you may find comfort in going to the cemetery to visit their gravesite. You might decide to donate money in your parent's name to their favorite charity or organization. More examples of these types of activities are listed in the next section.



Honoring & Remembering Your Parent

There are many different ways to honor and remember your parent. The best ways are those that are meaningful to you and your loved ones. Think about what was important to your parent. What organizations and activities were they committed to? How can you help others remember their contributions and legacy? But most importantly, what would be helpful for you as you grieve your parent? Below are some ideas to help you begin thinking creatively about ways to honor and remember your parent.

WAYS TO HONOR AND REMEMBER YOUR PARENT

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

Creating a visual reminder of your parent can be a wonderful way to honor them. Many people find great comfort in reviewing

pictures of their parent as a way to remember the happy and important moments of life.

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 parent or donating money to a cause they cared about can be a way to honor their legacy.

3) *Keep a special reminder with you.*

You may feel extremely lonely after your parent dies — this is a natural reaction. It may help you to carry something that reminds you of your parent. For example, you might carry a picture of your parent, a significant piece of jewelry (e.g., wedding ring, a special watch, etc.), or something else of significance 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 parent. Examples of daily, weekly, or monthly rituals include saying “good morning” to your parent’s picture as you get ready for the day, including them in your daily prayers, visiting their gravesite or other important location on a regular basis, and many other possibilities. Just as your relationship with your parent was built upon many daily interactions, so too can your connection be maintained with small, but significant moments of remembrance.

Epilogue: David's Story

This is a continuation of David's story from the beginning of the booklet. At the end I discuss how all of David's reactions are normal responses to his parents' deaths.

Over the next several months David continued to deal with various aspects of his parents' deaths. He wanted to take specific actions to help deal with his grief. David worried that he would forget all the wonderful things about his parents. He decided to put together a video collage that included pictures and memories that spanned their marriage and his childhood. David and his 16-year-old daughter worked together to scan old pictures and compile them into a presentation. His daughter even helped him include meaningful songs to play with the video. David found himself telling his daughter stories about his parents and about his own childhood. It turned out to be a wonderful way for them to share time on a meaningful project. A few months later David played the presentation at a family reunion and also gave copies of the video to his siblings.

David decided that he wanted to do something to specifically combat Alzheimer's Disease on behalf of his father. He formed a team to raise money as part of a local Alzheimer's Association Walk-a-thon. Several of David's co-workers and friends joined, and David felt especially proud that he was part of the fight to find a cure for this terrible disease.

David also found ways to remember his mother. He went back to the gift store and bought the angel-shaped salt and pepper shakers. Having them on his dining room table reminded him of all the special meals she had prepared over his lifetime, and also reminded him to be thankful for every meal he shared with his own family. Additionally, David took one of the small angel figurines from his mother's collection and added it to his key chain. David liked having the figurine with him (as well as a small pocketknife his father had often carried) wherever he went.

David found himself especially missing his parents as Christmas approached. He and his siblings' families had always had a Christmas Eve dinner at his parents' house. David decided to invite his siblings to his house and intentionally made some of the same dishes they usually ate. At the dinner David talked about his parents' absence, and he and his siblings shared Christmas memories they had regarding their parents. Thankfully, there was more laughter than tears as they talked about Christmases growing up.

After several months David realized he had reached the point where he could think about his parents with more joy than pain. He knew his parents' legacy would always be a part of him and he could consider the future with renewed hope.



David's Story: Dr. Troyer's Commentary

All of David's reactions to his parents' deaths were normal responses. I'll comment on several specific reactions:

- It is normal to be in a state of shock and disbelief after hearing about a loved one's death. This doesn't mean you didn't love them; it is simply your mind's way of helping you adjust to the news.
- Most people have difficulty concentrating or focusing after the death of a loved one. It can be difficult to sustain a train of thought or follow conversations.
- Some men think they are being weak or unmanly if they cry. Crying is simply one way that people show they are hurt and grieving. It does not mean you are less of a man.
- It is normal to feel a wide range of emotions and reactions during grief — including laughter. Don't feel guilty if you laugh while you are grieving. Telling humorous stories about the deceased can be a great way to honor them and take a break from intense sadness.
- Although no one looks forward to a funeral or a visitation, many people find that these events can be an opportunity to learn about their loved one from others, express their sadness, and share the legacy of the deceased.
- Like David when he began crying in the gift store, all bereaved people will experience random moments when they feel the pain of their loss. These moments are often impossible to predict, but they are a normal part of grief.
- In addition to feeling sadness, David was angry that his father had developed Alzheimer's Disease. Whatever the reason, it is common to be frustrated or even angry with the deceased. Most grieving people don't think they can talk about their frus-

tration for fear they will be viewed as uncaring. It can help to talk with a trusted person who won't judge your anger.

- Many adults whose parents die find there are specific occasions or holidays when they especially miss them. It is helpful to anticipate these events, openly recognize their absence, and talk freely about how much you miss them. Often people discover they can still find joy in the occasion after acknowledging their loss.
- There are many things you can do to honor your parent's memory. David decided to create a video montage and volunteer for a cause that was important to him, as well as carry meaningful items with him. For other examples see "Ways to Honor and Remember your Parent."



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 different forms and it may resurface at seemingly random times. In addition to these moments of pain, you will eventually have unexpected pleasant memories. For example, you may smile whenever you drive by a specific park because it reminds you of picnics with your parent. For most people the ache of grief does lessen over time.

My hope is that you are surrounded by supportive loved ones as you grieve the death of your parent and that eventually your happy memories endure longer than the sad ones.

With sincerest condolences,

JASON TROYER, PHD

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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Heal • Remember • Rebuild

With Dr. Jason Troyer



Feeling Lost & Stuck in Your Grief?



I guide you through a plan to heal, remember, & rebuild after loss

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