

How Your Brain Copes with Grief, and Why it Takes Time to Heal

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Holidays are never quite the same after someone we love dies. Even small aspects of a birthday or a Christmas celebration — an empty seat at the dinner table, one less gift to buy or make — can serve as jarring reminders of how our lives have been forever changed. Although these realizations are hard to face, clinical psychologist [Mary-Frances O'Connor](#) says we shouldn't avoid them or try to hide our feelings.

“Grief is a universal experience,” she notes, “and when we can connect, it is better.”

O'Connor, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Arizona, studies what happens in our brains when we experience grief. She says grieving is a form of learning — one that teaches us how to be in the world without someone we love in it. “The background is running all the time for people who are grieving, thinking about new habits and how they interact now.”

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