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# How-to Cope with Grief at End-of-Life

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eBook #18

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## How-to Cope with Grief at End-of-Life

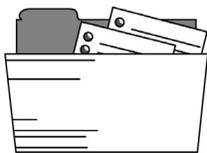
Loss is an inevitable part of life. Experiencing the loss of a loved one is one of the most profoundly challenging of all human experiences. How we cope with grief is an important life passage. Grief is a natural, healthy part of the healing process. It can help us recover and offer a path to new beginnings.

As part of our eBook series, Passare™ shares resources and guidance to help you cope with grief after a friend or loved one's End-of-Life. Passare helps guide you through one of life's most important passages.



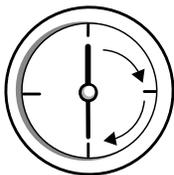
### You Will Learn About:

1. Defining Grief
2. Common Responses to Grief
3. Helpful Ways to Heal
4. Finding Support for Yourself
5. Comforting Others
6. Accepting Your Loss
7. Embracing New Beginnings
8. Summary



### The eBook includes:

- A. Frequently Asked Questions about Coping with Grief
- B. Resources for Coping with Grief



### Estimated Time Required:

30 minutes

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# Defining Grief

Grief is the natural process of reacting to a significant personal loss. Grief results in many different emotions and responses. Over time, normal grieving can help you accept and heal from your loss, and move forward with your life in a positive way.

## Types of Loss

Many types of loss may result in feelings of grief, including the loss of:

- A loved one, friend or cherished pet
- Health or physical ability
- Job, home or financial security
- An important personal goal

## Understanding Bereavement and Mourning

Bereavement and mourning are both part of the grieving process. Bereavement refers to the time period after your loss during which you experience grief. How long bereavement lasts depends on your personality, the type of relationship you had with your friend or loved one who passed away, how deeply you feel the loss and whether your loss was expected or sudden. Your cultural and religious background, support systems and even your financial status may affect how you respond to and cope with grief.

*Mourning* is the outward expression of grief. Cultural customs, rituals, traditions and society's rules for coping with loss often influence how people express grief. Mourning is often expressed as a period of time, as *someone in mourning*. The length of mourning and the feelings and rituals expressed can vary greatly by individual. Some people rely on friends and family during this time or embrace spiritual or religious practices. Some wear distinctive clothing and/or take part in symbolic gestures such as displaying a US flag at half-mast. Mourning rituals help you acknowledge the sadness of the loss while offering social support, structure and reaffirmation of life.

## Common Responses to Grief

Grief is a universal, uniquely personal experience. Everyone responds to and copes with grief in his or her own way. The length of the grieving process is also different for everyone. There is no "normal" timetable or predictable schedule for grief. It is important to be patient as you experience your own responses to your loss.

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With time and positive support, healing naturally occurs and gradually your feelings of grief will become less intense. It is normal for holidays or other significant dates to trigger feelings related to your loss. Having a plan in place at these times can help you cope. Read the section, "Helpful Ways to Heal" later in this eBook for helpful information and guidance.

It's also important to understand that the grief process is not linear, but more often experienced in cycles. The emotional progression can be compared to climbing a spiral staircase or even riding a roller coaster. You may feel at times like you're going in circles, yet you are still making progress toward healing. You may also feel steady or "up" one moment and down the next. This is a normal part of the grieving process. Because grief and your response to it is unpredictable, it may be best to make important decisions like relocating or changing jobs after the intensity of your grief subsides.

## "Normal" Grieving

The following are common responses and feelings you may experience as you grieve:

- Shock, disbelief and "numbness"
- Irritability, envy or anger - at the deceased, yourself, others or higher powers
- Sadness, loneliness or depression
- Frustration or feeling misunderstood
- Fatigue or lack of energy or motivation
- Anxiety or fearfulness
- Guilt or remorse
- Physical discomfort or feeling unwell
- Changes in appetite or sleep patterns
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Feelings of wanting to "escape"
- Ambivalence toward or avoidance of normal activities or events like visiting people and places that you previously enjoyed
- Thoughts or dreams of your deceased loved one

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## Unexpected Responses

If you had a complicated or challenging relationship with your deceased loved one you may feel surprised by unexpected emotions. It's not uncommon to experience distress, sadness, regret or even relief as you grieve the loss of the less than perfect relationship you may have had with your loved one.

## Grieving After Sudden or Expected Loss

Sudden loss due to events like accidents can be traumatic. Sudden loss can challenge your sense of security and confidence. As a result, you may experience sleep disturbances, anxiety and/or fearful, distressing thoughts.

Expected losses, like those due to terminal illness, sometimes give you more time to prepare for a loss. Yet no matter what type of loss you experience, there are still likely to be unexpected feelings of shock, sadness and grief after someone you care about passes away. For most people, End-of-Life initiates the grieving process.

## Stages of Grief

The stages of grief include a series of responses that you may experience as you try to understand how a loved one's End-of-Life affects you.

### *The Kübler-Ross Model*

American psychiatrist [Elisabeth Kübler-Ross](#) developed and introduced The Kübler-Ross Model, often called *The Five Stages of Grief*, in her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*. *The Five Stages of Grief* is a series of emotional stages you may experience after the loss of a loved one.

Although her model is widely embraced by the public and many grief specialists, Kübler-Ross emphasized that many of these "stages" may overlap, occur concurrently or not occur at all. She has said of her *Five Stages of Grief Model*: "They were never meant to tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grieving is as individual as our lives."

Kübler-Ross identified five stages of grief including: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

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- Denial “This can’t be happening to me”  
Denial, numbness or shock is a normal, immediate response to End-of-Life. It may initially protect you from experiencing the full intensity of your loss. Denial should not be confused with lack of caring. As you gradually acknowledge your loss, denial will diminish.
- Anger “Why did this happen to me?”  
Anger often occurs when you feel helpless, powerless or “abandoned” by a loved one’s End-of-Life. Anger may be directed at a higher power, others or life in general.
- Bargaining “Make this not happen, and in return I will . . .”  
Bargaining may involve thoughts about how you may have prevented or better managed your loss. If this stage is not fully resolved, Kübler-Ross suggests that intense feelings of remorse or guilt may interfere with healing.
- Depression “I feel too sad to cope”  
You may experience depression after you realize the true extent of your loss. Signs may include sleep and appetite disturbances, lack of energy and concentration, and feelings of loneliness and emptiness.
- Acceptance “I’m at peace with my loss”  
With time, you will learn to accept the full reality of your loss. As you adjust to life without your loved one, your life becomes calmer and more organized. Your physical symptoms lessen and your sadness gradually lifts. Acceptance does not mean instant happiness. Instead, you will gradually be able to think about your loved one without intense sadness, and enjoy living your life again.

### *Additional Stages of Grief*

Some grief specialists suggest that you may experience these additional stages of grief:

- Pain or Guilt  
After your feelings of shock and numbness diminish, they are replaced with the pain of loss. It is important to experience this discomfort, rather than to avoid it, hide or escape from it. You may feel guilt about your experiences with your loved one. Life may feel chaotic and overwhelming during this stage.
- Reconstruction  
Reconstruction may occur as feelings of depression lift. As you become more functional, your mind starts processing normally again. You will begin seeking realistic solutions to the challenges of living without your loved one.

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## Complicated Grief

The sadness of losing someone you love may never go away completely. Yet with time and support the intensity should be less. If your sadness keeps you from resuming your daily life or if you're uncertain whether your grieving is normal, we suggest that you consult a healthcare professional.



*Take a few minutes to answer these questions.*

1. What made your relationship with your loved one meaningful to you?
2. How do your family's customs, rituals or traditions affect how you express grief?
3. What responses or "stages" of grief are you experiencing since losing your loved one?

## Helpful Ways to Heal

The stress of an important personal loss can deplete your energy and emotional reserves. This makes it essential to take care of yourself when you're grieving.

### Things That May Help

There are many healthy ways to cope with your grief that can help you heal and encourage you toward moving forward with your life. These recommendations may help:

- **Time**  
You'll need time to feel and process the emotions that result from your loss.  
You'll need time with trusted friends and advisors to listen when you need to talk.
- **Preserve your health**  
Replenish yourself by eating healthfully. Try small meals if you have little appetite.  
Get as much rest as you can. Try to take brief walks or step outside for fresh air.
- **Accept your feelings**  
Be patient with yourself. It's fine to be angry, to cry or not cry. It's also fine to laugh and to find moments of joy. Let yourself feel without judgment.

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- Express yourself  
Write about your loss to say what you want to say to your loved one. Create a scrapbook or photo album to celebrate their life.
- Enjoy yourself  
Relax by taking a trip, watching a movie, listening to music or by reading a book. Indulge in a favorite food or experience nature to take small steps toward regaining pleasure in your life.
- Define a routine  
Just getting through moments in a day may seem difficult at first. Try to establish a simple, daily schedule to help restore structure and predictability. Do things at your own pace, one step at a time.
- Own your grief  
Your grief is your own. No one can tell you to “move on” or “get over it.” Find someone who will listen and support the feelings you need to explore.
- Plan ahead  
Significant dates, holidays or anniversaries may re trigger feelings of grief. If you’re sharing a holiday or life event with others, talk with them about ways to honor your loved one.
- Accept help  
Reduce stress by asking trusted friends to help with tasks that they can manage, like preparing a meal, caring for children or helping complete paperwork.
- Learn more  
There are many grief resources to help you understand your complex emotions. You may learn how to put your grief into perspective and discover new ways to cope.
- Embrace Spirituality or Faith  
If faith or spirituality is part of your life, embrace it. Pray, chant, sing or meditate if that is meaningful. Allow yourself to be near others who support your beliefs.
- Share with others  
You may find hope and comfort from those who have experienced a similar loss. Learning about what helped them recover may help your own healing process.

- Trust that you'll heal  
Try to have confidence in yourself that you will get through this overwhelming time. Do what feels healing to you and connects you to the people you care about.

## Things to Avoid

Trying to escape feelings of sadness and loss may prolong the grieving process. Unresolved grief can also lead to complications such as clinical depression, substance abuse and health problems. Avoid using alcohol or drugs to numb the feelings of grief or lift your mood artificially. If you feel you may need medication to help you cope, we suggest that you consult your healthcare provider for help.

## Finding Support for Yourself

Finding positive support can be the key to your recovery. Support resources include family and friends, hospice programs, support groups and spiritual or religious groups. Grief therapy with mental health professionals or therapists may also be helpful.

### Support from Family and Friends

Sharing your loss with others who care may be a powerful factor in your healing. Accept their support, even if you take pride in being strong and self-sufficient. Family and friends may welcome the chance to share memories. Ask a trusted friend if you need help connecting or asking for support from others.

### Hospice Support

An essential part of hospice is providing grief counseling to your family if your loved one received hospice care. Even if your deceased loved one was not in hospice before they passed away, you can ask hospice workers for grief support. Ask a social services professional or your funeral director to suggest where to find grief support through hospice programs.

### Grief Support Groups

Grief can feel lonely, even when loved ones are near. Sharing with others who have experienced similar losses may help. They often share helpful ideas or useful resources. Online support groups make it possible for you to receive support without having to leave home.

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Choose a support group where you feel comfortable sharing your feelings and concerns. Check with hospitals, hospice programs, religious or spiritual groups or your healthcare provider or funeral director to learn about grief support groups.

### Individual or Group Therapy

If your grief feels overwhelming, talking with a professional grief counselor may help. An experienced therapist can help you work through intense emotions and overcome obstacles to your healing. You can choose to work with a therapist individually or in a group setting, known as group therapy. Groups may be specialized to include those who are experiencing a certain type of grief, like loss of a child or spouse, or they may include people who are experiencing any type of grief.

### Spiritual or Religious Support

If you follow a religion, embrace the comfort that its mourning rituals can provide. Meaningful spiritual activities like praying, meditating, reading religious or spiritual texts, listening to uplifting music or attending services may bring comfort. If you're questioning your spirituality or faith as you grieve, talk to others in that community for support.



*Take a few minutes to answer these questions.*

1. Which trusted friends or loved ones typically provide you comfort and support??
2. How will you honor your loved one on holidays or the anniversary of their passing?
3. What spiritual, religious or other rituals provide comfort and stability for you?

## Comforting Others

Many people worry about what to say to a grieving person yet listening may be more important. A grieving friend or loved one needs to feel that it is okay to talk about and acknowledge their loved one.

You don't have to have all the answers or know exactly what to do. Sometimes, the most important thing you can do for a grieving person is to simply be there. Your support and caring presence will help them cope and begin to heal.

If you are grieving as well and must find the emotional reserves to comfort others, remember that sharing your loss and helping another may provide a welcome distraction from focusing on our own grief. You may feel a sense of strength and relief just from connecting with and providing support to someone else.

### Comforting Loved Ones and Friends

Ways you can help a friend or loved one who is experiencing grief include:

- Learn about the grief process to better understand and offer support
- Be available and present when you can
- Be an attentive, compassionate, nonjudgmental listener
- Be patient; remember that people grieve according to their own timeline
- Ask about their feelings since they may be experiencing many simultaneously
- Accept their full range of emotions including tears, anger, guilt or fear
- Respect his or her grief by saying things like, "I'm sorry you're hurting."
- Sit quietly with them; they may need silent, supportive company most now
- Offer support by saying things like, "How can I be most helpful to you now?"
- Follow through with offers of help
- Express genuine concern by saying things like, "I'm not sure what to say yet I want you to know that I care."
- Encourage them by saying things like, "I'm here for you."
- Ask about their loss to encourage them to talk about their loved one and feelings

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## Providing Ongoing Support

Grieving continues long after the final services are over and cards and flowers have ceased. The length of the grieving process varies and may be shorter or longer than people may expect. Practical ways to help a grieving friend or loved one include:

- Help with final arrangements, like choosing photos for a tribute DVD or making calls to family and friends
- Help research support groups and grief counseling; offer to drive or go with them to a meeting or appointment
- Shop for groceries or run errands
- Drop off a meal to their home
- Offer child care or transportation to or from school
- Help care for pets
- Help manage insurance forms, bills or other paperwork
- Help with housework like cleaning, laundry or yard work
- Invite them to go for a walk, to lunch or a movie
- Share a fun activity like a card game, art or cooking project
- Remember their loss on holidays, birthdays, anniversaries and other important days
- Call, email or write to check on them periodically
- Be patient with their recovery; they need time to adjust

## Comforting Children

Use sensitivity and make special considerations when talking to children about End-of-Life. Use simple, concrete terms to explain the loss of a loved one. Answer questions as gently and truthfully as you can, within reasonable boundaries.

Children often understand more than adults realize. Children may worry that they did something to cause their loved one to pass away. The truth helps them see that they are not at fault.

### *Ask for Help*

Inform their teacher or guidance counselor about their loss. Ask medical professionals, trusted friends who have children, a child psychologist or hospice professionals to help you address the sensitive issues of loss and grief with children. Remember to rely on another adult or a support group for your own support if needed.

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*Take a few minutes to answer these questions.*

1. Where can you learn more about the grief process to better support your grieving friend or loved one?
2. How can you best provide ongoing support to a grieving co-worker or friend?
3. What resources will help you offer positive support to a grieving child?

## Accepting Your Loss

Your relationship with your deceased loved one was unique, whether simple or complicated. With time, it is important that you accept your loss. Acceptance is sometimes a complex process. The following ways may help you learn to accept your loss:

- **Attend final services**  
Help organize or attend a ceremony or event to honor the memory of your loved one. This is important even if your loved one is missing and presumed deceased. A final ceremony will help you and others honor their memory and share your loss.
- **Identify the issue**  
If accepting your loss is challenging for you, try to determine the reason(s). You may need extra support to find clarity and support as you grieve.
- **Release regret**  
If you wanted a different relationship with your loved one, try to attach something positive to their passing. Meditate, wish or pray for them to rest in peace. If you regret something, End-of-Life provides a chance to finally forgive yourself and others.
- **Get support**  
An experienced grief therapist can help you overcome obstacles to your healing.

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- Create a lasting legacy  
Planting a tree, making a charitable donation or establishing a scholarship in their name will help you see something positive grow from your loss that helps others.
- Resolve to accept your loss  
Visualize your future with acceptance behind you. Acceptance is a process. With time and commitment, you'll accept the loss of your loved one and begin to heal.

## Embracing New Beginnings

Processing your grief may or may not happen quickly. Recovery can include alternating feelings of emotional upset and peace. Exploring new relationships or enjoying activities after a loss can be challenging. Remember, you deserve health and happiness.

### Set Small Goals

You may find that setting small goals is helpful. For example, going to a movie tonight and taking a trip to visit a friend next week may help you get through the immediate future. Your enjoyment may not feel the same at first. With time you'll be able to set longer-range goals. Try to live one moment and one day at a time.

Consider these suggestions to ease yourself into your new reality of living without your loved one:

### Reconnect and Gain Perspective

- Learn something new  
Enroll in an adult education or fitness class or join a book club. Acquiring new skills, interacting with others and staying physically active can promote healing.
- Volunteer  
Offer your time to a cause or activity that you feel strongly about. Helping others can have a positive effect on your perspective. Volunteer to help schools or your library with reading programs for youth or provide much needed visits to elders in nursing homes. There are many possibilities to connect, help others and feel useful.

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## Explore Your Passions

- Indulge your interests  
Is there something you have always wanted to do? Now is the time to re-invest in your hobbies. Run a race, revisit your musical or artistic talents, or plant your garden. Pursuing your dreams can help provide purpose in your life.
- Adopt a pet  
Pets can be a great source of comfort and enjoyment. They provide rewarding affection and can refocus your care and attention toward a living presence.

## Use Your Loss

- Share your knowledge to help another  
Contact a medical association, hospice provider or support group and ask how you may help others who are experiencing a loved one's End-of-Life.

Finding new meaning, cultivating happiness and sharing what you have learned can inspire hope as you move forward with your life and build your new future.



*Take a few minutes to answer these questions.*

1. How can you create a lasting legacy for your loved one?
2. What hobbies or passions most inspire you?
3. What volunteer opportunities exist that you would you enjoy?

## Summary

Grieving the loss of a loved one is a universal, yet uniquely personal experience that forever changes us. Grief allows us to become a nobler version of ourselves by teaching us about our humanity and capacity to love. Grief, in all its complexity, reveals the depth of our affection and connection to our loved ones - and this is what makes healing, recovery and looking with hope toward a meaningful future possible.

Please visit: [www.passare.com](http://www.passare.com) for more information and expert resources on coping with grief and many other End-of-Life Management topics.

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# Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

## 1. *What is Grief?*

Grief is a person's natural response to an important personal loss. Grief may generate many different emotions and responses. Over time, normal grieving can help you accept and heal from your loss, and move forward with your life in a positive way.

## 2. *What are some common responses to grief?*

You may experience grief as a mental, physical, social, and/or emotional response. Mental responses may include difficulty in concentrating and making decisions. Physical responses may include sleep disturbances, changes in appetite, physical discomfort and feeling unwell. Social responses may include ambivalence toward people, places and activities that you previously enjoyed with your deceased loved one. Emotional responses may include having feelings of disbelief, anxiety, anger, sadness and even guilt. It's common to have "rollercoaster emotions" as you grieve.

## 3. *How long will my grief last?*

The length of the grieving process is different for everyone. There is no "normal" timetable or predictable schedule for grief. How long grief lasts depends on your personality, the type of relationship you had with your friend or loved one who passed away, whether the loss was expected or sudden, and your cultural and religious background. It is important to be patient with yourself as you grieve. With time and positive support, healing naturally occurs and your grief will feel less intense.

## 4. *What is the difference between bereavement and mourning?*

Bereavement and mourning are both part of the grieving process. Bereavement refers to the time period after your loss during which you experience grief. Mourning is the outward expression of grief. It is also expressed as a period of time. This time period, and the feelings and rituals expressed can vary greatly by individual. Mourning rituals help acknowledge the sadness of the loss while offering social support, structure and reaffirmation of life.

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## *5. Why do I have to experience my grief?*

It may seem easiest to want to avoid grief, yet what we most often want is to avoid the sadness we feel from our loss. Grief is a natural, healthy part of the healing process that will ultimately allow us to move forward with our lives. Trying to escape feelings of sadness and loss may prolong the grieving process. Unresolved grief can also lead to complications such as clinical depression, substance abuse and health problems.

## *6. How can I support a child who is grieving?*

Children need support and security after the loss of a loved one. They may need extra reassurance that they are safe. You can help children demonstrating that it's okay for them to feel their emotions and ask questions about their loss. Children often express themselves through stories, games and artwork. Encourage this self-expression and look for clues about how they are coping. Inform their teacher or guidance counselor about their loss. Ask pediatricians, trusted friends who have children, a child psychologist or hospice professionals to help you address the sensitive issues of loss and grief with children.

## *7. How do I know if my grieving is "normal?"*

The sadness of losing someone you love may never go away completely. Yet with time and support the intensity should lessen. If your sadness keeps you from resuming your life and you're uncertain about whether your grieving is normal, we suggest that you consult a healthcare professional.

## *8. How can I find support while I'm grieving?*

Finding positive support can be the key to a person's recovery. Support resources include family and friends, hospice programs, bereavement support groups and spiritual or religious groups. Grief therapy with mental health professionals, therapists or counselors may also be helpful. Please visit: [www.passare.com](http://www.passare.com) for more information and expert resources on coping with grief and many other End-of-Life Management topics.

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## Resource List:

# Coping with Grief at End-of-Life

To learn more about how to cope with grief after a loved one passes away, consider the following resources:

- Bosplace.org: [www.bosplace.org](http://www.bosplace.org) or 713-942-8339
- Caring Connections: 800-658-8898 or [www.caringinfo.org](http://www.caringinfo.org)
- Elisabeth Kübler-Ross Foundation: or [www.ekrfoundation](http://www.ekrfoundation)
- GriefNet.org: [www.GriefNet.org](http://www.GriefNet.org)
- Griefshare.org: [www.GriefShare.org](http://www.GriefShare.org) or: 800-395-5755
- Hello Grief Resources: [www.hellogrief.org](http://www.hellogrief.org)
- HelpGuide.org: [www.helpguide.org/mental/grief\\_loss.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/grief_loss.htm)
- Hospice Foundation of America: 1-800-854-3402 or:  
<http://hospicefoundation.org/End-of-Life-Support-and-Resources/Grief-Support/What-to-Expect>
- KidsAid.com: [www.KidsAid.com](http://www.KidsAid.com)
- National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization: 703-837-1500 or  
<http://www.nhpco.org/search/node/grief>
- Recover-from-grief.com: [www.Recover-from-grief.com](http://www.Recover-from-grief.com)
- The Centre for the Grief Journey: [www.griefjourney.com](http://www.griefjourney.com)
- The Dougy Center: National Center for Grieving Children & Families:  
[www.dougy.org/grief-resources/](http://www.dougy.org/grief-resources/) or: 866-775-5683
- US Department of Health and Human Services  
<http://nihseniorhealth.gov/endoflife/copingwithgrief/01.html>

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From birth to death, life is a series of passages. Only Passare allows you to connect and collaborate with your family any time, anywhere to easily explore and plan for End-of-Life.

With Passare, you can engage with trusted End-of-Life experts and relevant resources that guide you through one of life's most important passages and ensure that the specific needs and wishes of you and your family are honored. Please visit [www.passare.com](http://www.passare.com) for more information on how we can help simplify End-of Life Management.



### Mark Zilberman, LCSW and Geriatric Care Manager

Mark Zilberman, LCSW, is the Director of NorthStar Care and Guidance, LLC, a geriatric care management agency devoted to guiding and managing the special medical, psychological and social needs of seniors, their families and disabled people of all ages.

Since 2000, Mark has dedicated his time to geriatric care management. He is a member of National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers and National Association of Social Workers. He also assists the Board of Directors for the New York chapter of NAPGCM

Mark acquired his Social Work degree from SUNY at Stony Brook. He acquired professional specializations including Credentialed Alcohol and Substance Abuse Counselor and Licensed Clinical Alcohol and Drug Counselor in alcohol and substance abuse treatment.

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