How do we experience grief?

Voices and experiences of those who have suffered a loss

A report by the Suddenly Alone Foundation and the Maria Grzegorzewska University Institute of Psychology
Warsaw, 2026

FUNDACJA nagle sami — BY MÓC ŻYĆ DALEJ

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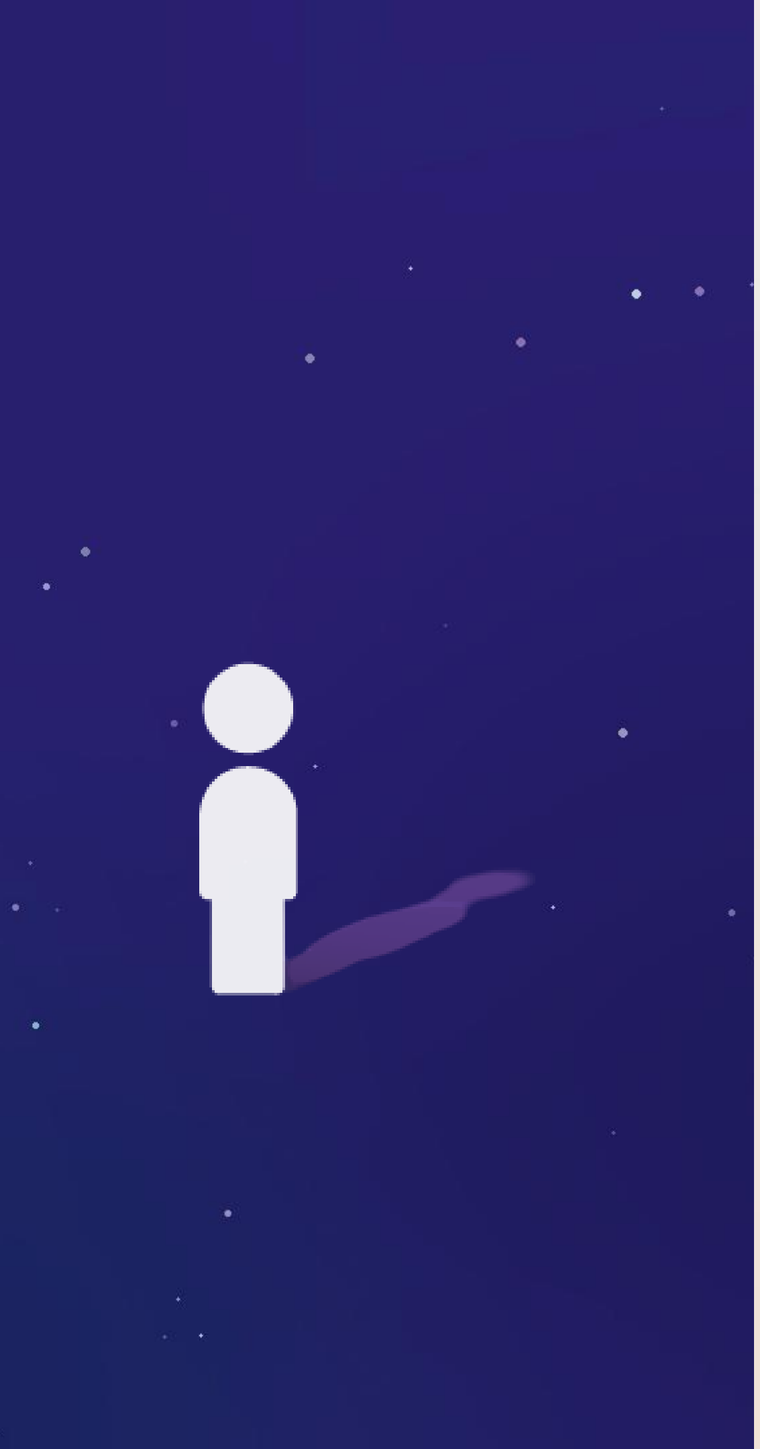

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Foreword

Olga Puncewicz

President and Founder of the Suddenly Alone Foundation

Before we look at the numbers, let’s think about the people they represent. Grief is an experience that will affect most of us, yet it remains a taboo subject. The results of this study didn’t surprise me, but they moved me, because behind every response are people and their stories of loss. I remember my own grief and the moment when it was hard to believe that life could ever look different again. Over time, however, I discovered that while longing and loss remain with us forever, it is also possible to move forward with life. Different, but meaningful and good. I founded the Nagle Sami Foundation because I know how much presence, understanding, and reliable knowledge are needed after a loss. I invite you to review the survey results and join the conversation on how we can better support those who are grieving.

Foreword

Grief is still discussed far too rarely, and even more rarely are the voices of those who are actually experiencing it heard. In preparing this report, our top priority was to give a voice to those who have experienced loss. The figures presented here reveal recurring experiences, but it is only through personal accounts that their significance, complexity, and diversity become apparent. We did not want to fit grief into a single mold or suggest norms dictating how it should be experienced. The responses we collected remind us that loss affects emotions, relationships, and daily functioning. It is also a social experience influenced by the reactions of loved ones and the wider community.

We hope this report will contribute to more frequent and thoughtful conversations about grief. It should also help us listen more attentively to those who have experienced loss, formulate expectations more carefully, and provide support that meets their actual needs.

Marcin Sękowski

Institute of Psychology, Maria Grzegorzewska University

15 years of support for those in grief

For over 15 years, the Suddenly Alone Foundation has been supporting people in grief and those who have suffered the sudden loss of loved ones. We operate a nationwide, free, and anonymous Support Helpline at 800 108 108, a therapeutic center, and an Academy that trains psychologists and psychotherapists. We also support schools, organizations, and institutions in crisis situations by providing training and interventions following the death of community members.

To date, we have provided psychological support to over 30,000 people.

The foundation was established by Olga Puncewicz following the death of her husband, the Himalayan mountaineer Piotr Morawski.

Every year in Poland, approximately 100,000 families suddenly lose a loved one.

Psychology based on research and social engagement

The Institute of Psychology operates within the Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw, a public university with over a century of tradition. It combines the education of future psychologists with research addressing important social issues and the needs of professional practice. Over 700 students are enrolled in the psychology program.

The Institute conducts research on topics such as grief, the experience of loss, and education about death, as well as mental health, crises, addictions, and social activities in the broadest sense. The Institute's staff combine academic work with practical application, collaborating with foundations, healthcare facilities, schools, support centers, and social welfare institutions.

We combine research, education, and practice to better understand human experiences and develop professional forms of support.

WHY THIS REPORT WAS CREATED

The three objectives of this report

1

We want to give a voice to those who have experienced loss

We show how they themselves describe their grief: what was difficult, surprising, and helpful.

2

We want to raise awareness of the topic of grief

We're drawing the attention of the public and the media to a topic that remains taboo.

3

We want to teach how to talk to someone who is grieving

We point out which words help and which hurt, and why.

Who were the participants in the study?

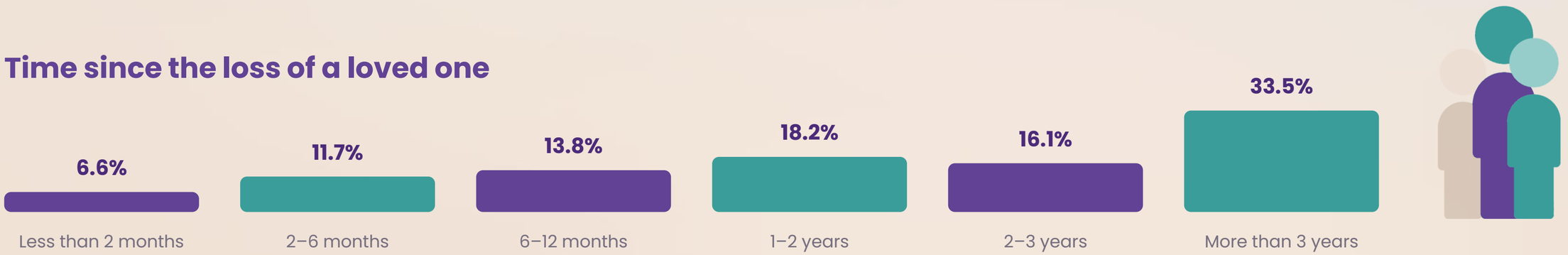
471
people took part in the study

97.2%
were women

41 years
average age of participants

33.5%
of participants had lost a loved one more than 3 years ago

Time since the loss of a loved one



TWO PERSPECTIVES

Words and numbers. Together.

The report combines two perspectives: figures from the survey's multiple choice questions and the participants' own words from the open-ended questions.
These individual, less frequent responses are no less important. They often reveal experiences that are harder to put into words or less widely recognized by society.
This study is not representative of all people in mourning in Poland.
Information on the study's methodology can be found at the end of the report.

KEY FINDINGS

What does our survey show?

1

There is no single “correct” way to grieve.

People who have experienced a loss go through pain, longing, emptiness, loneliness, and emotional ups and downs to varying degrees.

2

Grief often lasts longer than those around us expect.

It doesn’t always end after a few weeks or months. It doesn’t last a “magical” year. It can come back in waves over the years.

3

The most frequently expressed need is the presence of others.

Simple messages that participants needed to hear kept coming up in their statements: “I’m here,” “you can count on me,” “I’m right here.”

4

Support doesn’t always require words.

For some people, a calm presence, a listening ear, or concrete help was more important than words of comfort.

5

Some words of comfort can be hurtful.

Phrases like “time heals all wounds” or “others have it worse” were particularly difficult.

6

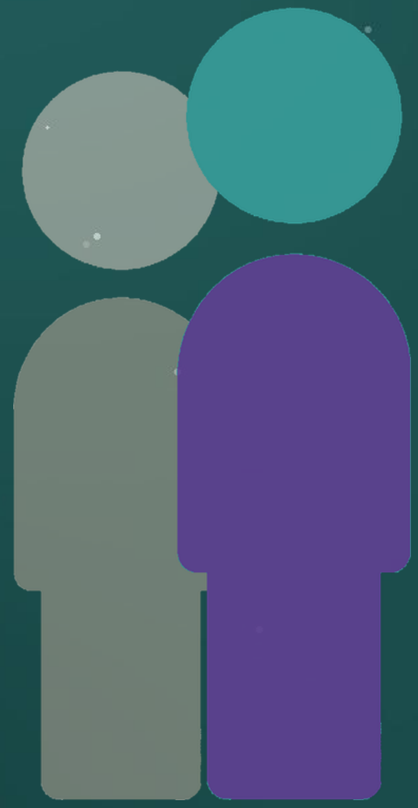
Grief is a personal experience, but also a social one.

The reactions of loved ones, coworkers, and the wider community can either help or deepen feelings of loneliness.

PART I

What the numbers say

We examined four dimensions of the grieving experience: cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and social.



COGNITIVE ASPECT

Grief takes up a lot of space in one’s thoughts

Note: Percentage of respondents who gave the indicated answer. N = 471 survey participants.

What does this mean for us?

Thinking about the deceased does not indicate weakness or an unwillingness to move forward. It is a testament to the depth of the relationship we shared with them. So, before we accuse someone of thinking about someone else for too long or too often, let’s ask ourselves: why do we want to impose any time limits on other people’s feelings?

THE NUMBER THAT STICKS IN YOUR MIND

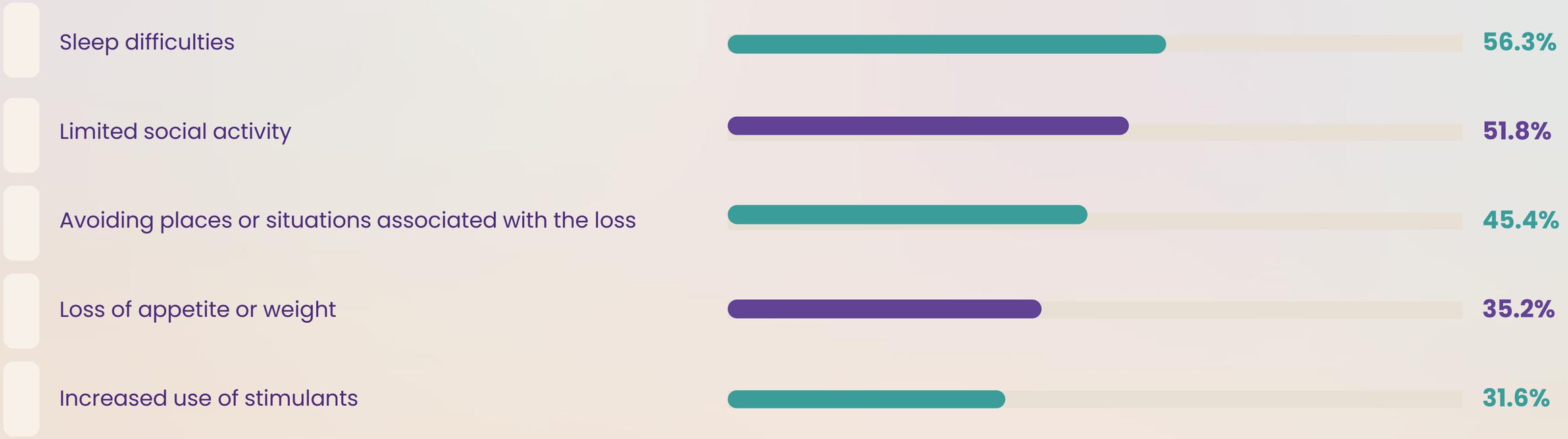
83.7%

of people who have experienced a loss analyze events related to the deceased

It is the way the mind tries to come to terms with the irreversible.

BEHAVIORAL ASPECT

Changes in daily functioning



Note: Percentage of respondents who gave the indicated answer. N = 471 survey participants.

What does this mean for us?

The best kind of help doesn't have to be a conversation about feelings; it can be practical support: bringing food, going for a walk together, or simply being there quietly for someone who hasn't been sleeping well for weeks.

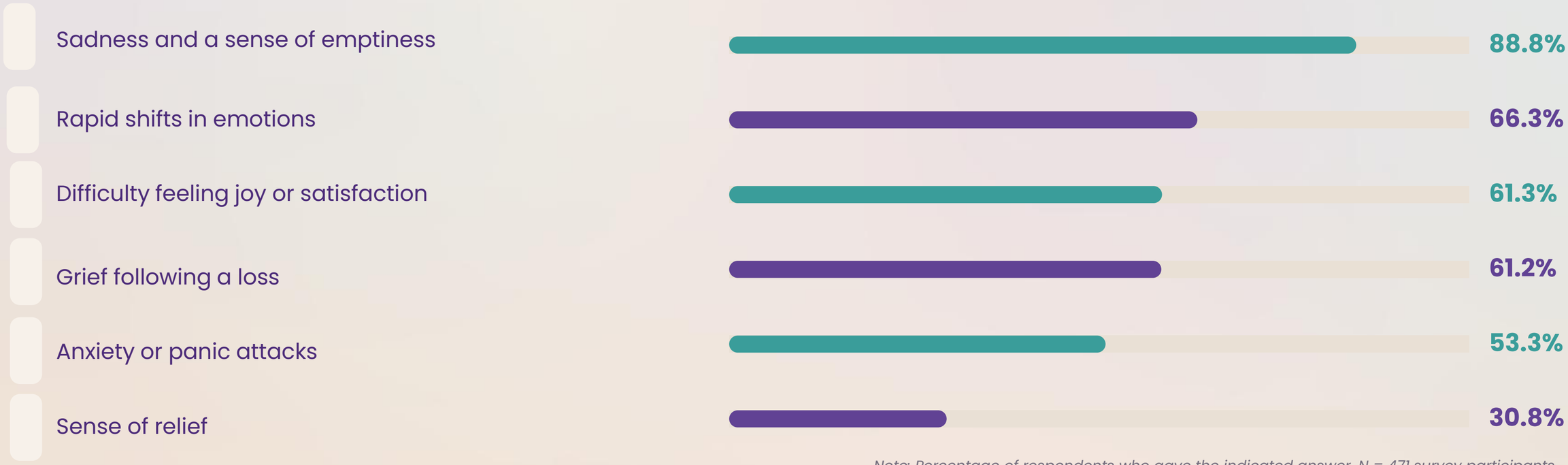
EXPERT COMMENT

Sleep disorders come to the forefront because people who have experienced a loss are immersed in processing that absence even during the time that was meant for biological regeneration.
This shows how deeply grief is rooted in the body, not just in the mind.

Piotr Kiembłowski
Psychologist, expert at the Suddenly Alone Foundation

EMOTIONAL ASPECT

Sadness and emptiness dominate other emotions



Note: Percentage of respondents who gave the indicated answer. N = 471 survey participants.

What does this mean for us?

Let's not try to forcefully "fix" someone's mood after a loss. Let's listen, not judge.
Let's be ready to accept a range of emotions, including extreme ones: fear, anxiety, and a sense of relief.

THE MOST COMMON REACTION TO LOSS

88.8%

people who have experienced a loss feel sadness and a sense of emptiness

EXPERT COMMENT

In addition to sadness and emptiness, other emotions may also arise, such as anger, guilt, relief, or even moments of joy. Their coexistence does not diminish the authenticity of the grief being experienced, but rather attests to the complexity of the human psyche and adaptive mechanisms. It is crucial to create a space where a person in mourning can safely experience and express their emotions, without pressure to "rush" through them or be judged.

Iwona Nowakowska
Institute of Psychology, Maria Grzegorzewska University

SOCIAL ASPECT

Support from loved ones does not rule out loneliness

Note: Percentage of respondents who gave the indicated answer. N = 471 survey participants.

What does this mean for us?

You can be surrounded by loving people and still feel a deep sense of loneliness while grieving. The most important takeaway from this study is simple: instead of assuming that someone already has enough support, let's just ask how we can help.

EXPERT COMMENT

In my clinical work, I keep coming back to one observation: people who are grieving rarely need a specialist right away. First, they need someone who will stay with them, even in silence. Only when this basic sense of security is met can we talk about deeper therapeutic work.

Piotr Kiembłowski
Psychologist, expert at the Nagle Sami Foundation

PART II

How do survey participants describe their grief?

Results of the six open-ended questions in the survey:
on grief in the participants' own words.

COMMENT

The survey results confirm what psychotherapists and psychologists at the Suddenly Alone Foundation encounter every day: there is no single “right” way to grieve. Every story of loss is different, as are the pace and manner of experiencing grief. This makes it important to foster a social understanding that does not judge, rush, or impose predefined scenarios.

Marianna Lutomska
Vice President of the Suddenly Alone Foundation

QUESTION 1 OF 6

If you had to describe grief in one sentence, what would it be?

Note: Percentage of respondents who gave the indicated answer. N = 471 survey participants. The most frequently mentioned topics are presented

Summary:

Responses often took the form of short, powerful statements, but there were also descriptions of grief as a process and a journey of learning to live anew.

STATEMENTS FROM PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED A LOSS

“Boundless pain.”

“A pain that tears you apart from the inside, a pain you can’t afford to feel.”

“An abyss.”

“A black hole.”

“Nothing will ever be the same again.”

Authentic statements from study participants (open-ended survey questions).

QUESTION 2 OF 6

If you had to name one thing about grief that others should know, what would it be?

Note: Percentage of respondents who selected the indicated answer. N = 471 survey participants. The most frequently mentioned topics are presented.

Summary

The most important message concerned not only suffering, but also the way other people react to someone who has experienced a loss.

EXPERT COMMENT

It is particularly evident that the respondents do not describe grief as an orderly and predictable process. They write about its volatility, its prolonged nature, and its relapses, which can occur even after a calmer period. There is more to these responses than a mere description of personal experience. They are a clear appeal to those around them: for patience, attentiveness, and refraining from imposing a pace. Those who have experienced a loss do not want their experiences to be oversimplified, nor do they want their loved ones to withdraw simply because they do not know what to say. A supportive presence can take many forms. For some, it means conversation; for others, silence; and for still others, a willingness to be there and respond to needs that may change over time.

Marcin Sękowski, Ph.D., Prof. APS, Institute of Psychology, Polish Psychological Association

STATEMENTS FROM PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED A LOSS

“The pain that stays with you forever, even though life goes on.”

“Grief is with us all the time.”

“It hurt, it hurts, and it will continue to hurt.”

*“No matter how many loved ones are around us,
in mourning, we are alone.”*

“Everyone has their own time and way of dealing with it.”

Authentic statements from study participants (open-ended survey questions).

QUESTION 3 OF 6

What is one thing about the grieving process that surprised you?

Note: Percentage of respondents who selected the indicated answer. N = 471 survey participants. The most frequently mentioned topics are presented.

Summary:

Some people also wrote about a surprising sense of calm, relief, and the return of laughter. Grief can also diminish over time.

STATEMENTS FROM PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED A LOSS

“It’s a long-term process that has much more negative effects than I had anticipated.”

“Reevaluating friends.”

“Grief returns when you least expect it, even when it seems like we’ve already moved past our grief.”

“The fact that I can laugh again.”

Authentic statements from study participants (open-ended survey questions).

QUESTION 4 of 6

What would they like to hear from their loved ones?

One in three

people most often mentioned the need to hear that someone is there for them and that they can count on that person.
More important than “the right words” was the feeling that they weren’t alone.

What people who are grieving would like to hear:

- *“I’m here. You can count on me.”*
- *“You have the right to feel what you’re feeling.”*
- *“You don’t have to say anything; what matters is that someone is there.”*

QUESTION 5 OF 6

Words that hurt despite good intentions

Note: Percentage of respondents who gave the indicated answer. N = 471 survey participants. The most frequently mentioned topics are presented.

Important:
Almost every one of these statements is made out of concern and a desire to help.
However, it’s worth learning to replace these words with other, more supportive ones.

THE MOST COMMON PHRASE

21.9%

of people who have experienced a loss indicate that the phrase that hurts the most is: “Time heals all wounds.”

It’s better to replace this phrase with an empathetic presence.

EXPERT COMMENT

Phrases like “Time heals all wounds” rarely stem from ill will. More often, they reflect the helplessness of someone who doesn’t know how to describe another person’s pain, so they resort to a cliché. It’s important to understand this when it comes to loved ones. But that doesn’t mean we should stop learning to speak differently.

Piotr Kiembłowski
Psychologist, expert at the Suddenly Alone Foundation

What hurts and what helps

Phrases that hurt, even when spoken with the intention of offering support:

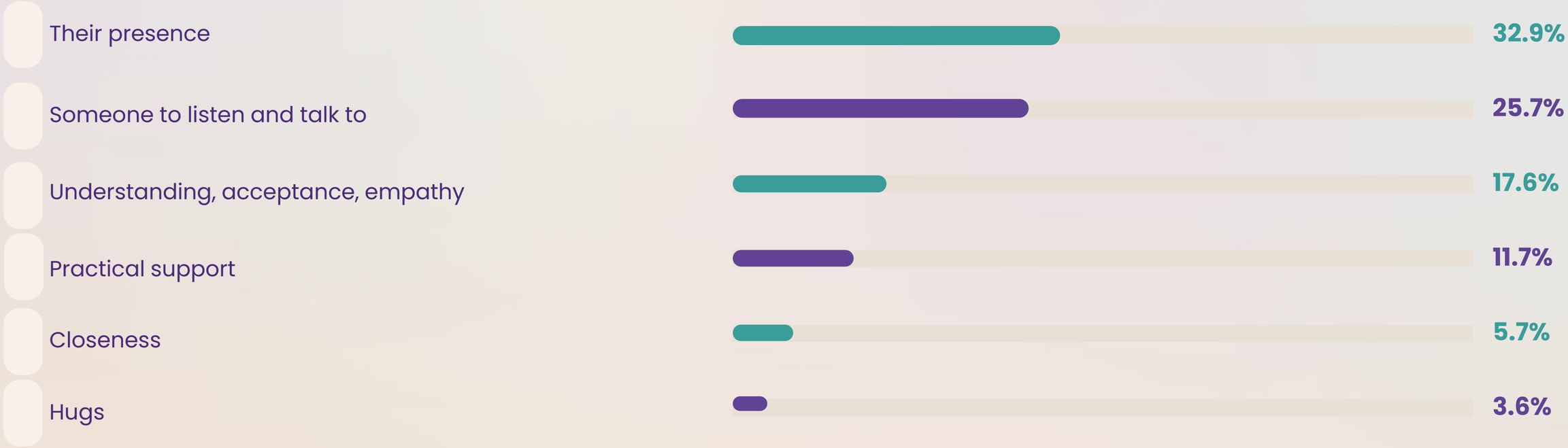
“Time heals all wounds.”
“Pull yourself together; there’s no point in crying.”
“You have someone to live for; you have to keep going.”
“You’re young; you’ll have another child.”

Supportive phrases:

“I’m here for you; you can count on me.”
“You have every right to feel the way you do.”
“You don’t have to say anything—I’m here.”
“Tell me about her/him if you’d like.”

QUESTION 6 OF 6

What kind of support would you need from your loved ones?



Note: Percentage of respondents who gave the indicated answer. N = 471 survey participants. The most frequently mentioned topics are presented.

Explanation:
Practical support includes, for example, shopping, cooking, dealing with official matters, or helping to sort through the belongings of the deceased.

STATEMENTS FROM PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED A LOSS

“Presence. Without words, without imposing.”

“They don’t give advice; they understand.”

“Help with simple daily tasks: shopping, eating, dealing with government paperwork.”

“Just being there, but quietly.”

Authentic statements from study participants (open-ended survey questions).

Not every loss is recognized equally

Some of the statements touched on the issue of losses that are harder to name or less socially recognized: the death of an unborn child, a friend, an ex-partner, or another emotionally significant person.
A lack of recognition from others can deepen loneliness and make the grieving process more difficult.

If this loss is significant to the person experiencing it, it deserves to be taken seriously.

PART III

Conclusions and recommendations

It is possible to learn how to support people who are grieving.
Treating their needs and wishes as a guide for further action.
Don’t judge. Just be.

Five key findings

1	**There is no single “correct” way to grieve**	There is no single universal way to experience grief. Support should not be based on a one-size-fits-all approach.
2	**Suffering isn’t always visible**	A smile, work, or conversation doesn’t necessarily mean that a person has “already moved on.” Sometimes, these are simply ways of coping.
3	**The most important support begins with simply being there**	A simple “I’m here” is often more important than any words of comfort.
4	**Good intentions can hurt**	Phrases like “Time heals all wounds” reduce grief to an overly simplistic formula.
5	**Not every loss is viewed the same way**	The loss of an unborn child, a friend, or a partner isn’t always understood by those around you.

Preliminary guidelines

1

Start by being there, not by finding the perfect words

A simple assurance like “I’m here; you can count on me” is often more important than stock phrases.

2

Don’t rush the grieving process

Avoid phrases like “time heals all wounds” or “you have to move on,” which suggest that the pain should already be gone.

3

Listen without judging or giving advice

Allow space for sadness, anger, silence, and ambiguous emotions.

4

Ask about their needs; offer concrete help

For some, conversation is important; for others, silence or practical help.

Preliminary guidelines, continued

5

Remember the deceased

Talking about the deceased and saying their name have often been more important than silence.

6

Don’t compare losses; don’t downplay suffering

Phrases like “others have it worse” take away the sense that our suffering is acknowledged.

7

Acknowledge different kinds of loss

The loss of an unborn child, a friend, or a former life partner is often less socially recognized.

8

When appropriate, combine your presence with an encouragement to seek professional help

A referral to a psychotherapist should not sound like you’re distancing yourself from the person who is grieving.

EXPERT COMMENT

Like any study, this one also has its limitations, which should be taken into account when interpreting the results. Our survey was primarily completed by women and people who are seeking support or are open to receiving it. Nevertheless, the study covers experiences related to the loss of various loved ones: parents, partners, children, and friends. As a result, it presents a diverse picture of grief.

Iwona Nowakowska
Institute of Psychology, Maria Grzegorzewska University

Limitations of the study

- The study was not conducted on a representative sample of people in grief in Poland.
- The participants are primarily people who have had contact with the Foundation’s activities.
- Women were by far the majority (97.2%); the results most fully reflect their experiences.
- The study took the form of an anonymous, self-report-based online survey; it is not a psychological diagnosis.

The full methodology, including a description of the sample, the questionnaire, and the statistical analysis, can be found on the next page.

METHOD

Research methodology

Sample

471 people, including 458 women (97.2%), 12 men (2.5%), and 1 non-binary person. Average age: 41 years (range 15–76 years). Recruitment took place through the Foundation's support groups, both online and in person, as well as via a closed Facebook group.

Procedure

An anonymous online survey, available from October 9, 2023, to October 9, 2024. Most responses were collected in October and November 2023.

Research instruments

A three-part survey: demographic section, 23 closed-ended questions (1–5 scale) regarding thoughts, emotions, behavior, and relationships, and 6 open-ended questions.

Analysis

Multiple choice questions: percentage distributions, aggregate categories "no / hard to say / yes." Open-ended questions: thematic analysis, coded by three independent individuals, Krippendorff's alpha coefficient ranging from 0.75 to 0.81.

Sample characteristics

Gender

Women: 458 (97.2%)

Men: 12 (2.5%)

Non-binary person: 1 (0.2%)

Age

Range: 15–76 years

Mean: 41 years

Time since loss

Up to 2 years: 50.3%

2–3 years: 16.1%

More than 3 years: 33.5%

The study was conducted as an anonymous online survey among people in contact with the Suddenly Alone Foundation. The sample is not representative of the general population.

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