

LOCAL

'Our lives can be shattered in an instant:' National Grief Awareness Day shines light on grief

[Jennifer M. Torres](#) Florida Today

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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

National Grief Awareness Day is observed annually to highlight the importance of understanding and supporting those who are grieving.

Grief is a unique and individual journey with no set timeline, often leading to personal change.

Resources and support groups are available for those struggling with grief, emphasizing the importance of seeking help when needed.

While preparing for their daughter's wedding in 2008, Rhonda Robinson and her husband, Mike, were out of town when she answered a call that changed everything.

The caller took a deep breath before she said, 'Oh, Rhonda, there's been an accident — it's bad,'" Robinson recalled.

Her 16-year-old son had been driving his younger brother, Danny, and two friends to play basketball when a truck struck their car on a rural Illinois road. At the hospital, she and her husband were led into a small room where two strangers delivered the words no parent should ever hear. Their son Danny, just a month shy of 14, had died at the scene.

After years of writing parenting columns and articles, Robinson never imagined she would one day write about grief. But in 2020, she published "FreeFall: Holding onto Faith When the Unthinkable Strikes."

“I realized that there are so many ways our lives can be shattered in an instant. Our culture does not understand grief,” she said. “The common expectation is that we pass through it like a phase, and we should completely get over it and move on, rather than to be changed by it.”

Grief is change

That lack of understanding is one of the reasons National Grief Awareness Day is observed each year on Aug. 30 — to shine a light on the reality of grief and the need for better understanding and support.

“Grief is change” according to Karyn Arnold, the founder of Grief in Common, a free online platform that connects grieving individuals with others experiencing similar losses.

“It changes our life, our routine, our plan and right along with it, grief changes us,” but she adds, “some of these changes aren’t necessarily all bad.”

For Robinson, that change led her to write a book in order to help others process thoughts of guilt and regret — which she said, “can be deadly when mixed with grief” and “left unchecked, they can pull you from grieving into despair.”

Finding purpose through loss

For the family of 18-year-old Emily Dailey, grief turned into a mission, leading to the establishment of Give Yourself a Reason, a volunteer-led nonprofit founded to raise mental health awareness among teens and young adults in Brevard County.

Dailey, a lifelong competitive dancer — and a beloved daughter, sister, niece, and friend to many — took her own life in January, just days after returning to her college apartment in Tallahassee from her home in Viera.

“Emily's death came as such a surprise, and with her being so young, it really hit our family hard,” said her aunt, Shannon Sviben. “Her brother was 19, and my own children were 16 and 19, and struggling with what had happened, and with the

family not understanding the why behind her death, it was a challenge to find any peace.”

Before she passed, Emily told her cousin, Erin, that she hoped to get a tattoo with the words “Give Yourself a Reason,” a lyric from Noah Kahan’s song “Call Your Mom,” which speaks to the struggle for mental wellness. After her death, the family embraced those words as both a tribute and a cause.

“We thought if we could get the message out and help create meaningful connections, perhaps we could help someone else in a way we couldn't help her,” Sviben said.

The grief still comes in waves, she admitted, with some days better than others. “Give Yourself a Reason has been a way to pour into something meaningful on the days when it's the most difficult to get through,” she said.

A day to recognize grief’s many paths

National Grief Awareness Day serves as a reminder that there’s no single path through loss. It’s a day to show compassion, whether by reaching out to a grieving friend, listening without judgment, or simply acknowledging that grief doesn’t follow a timeline. It also underscores the importance of self-care and seeking help when the weight feels too heavy to carry alone.

Grief looks different for everyone — for some it sparks change or purpose, but for many it’s a daily struggle to simply move ahead. The morning of the accident, Robinson said her son Danny had begged her to take him with them on their trip out of town.

“I was sure he would spend the day bugging me for change for vending machines and complaining about boredom,” Robinson said. “Playing that conversation over and over in my mind made me believe that his death could have been prevented—if only I had not been so selfish.”

However, a few months later, she learned that several members of her family had the same feelings — what she refers to as “the same toxic thoughts.” That his death was somehow their fault.

“We cannot hold ourselves responsible for decisions made without knowledge of a future we could not see and had no power to change,” Robinson said. “Our minds have a way of wandering into dangerous waters, but we do have the power to redirect them.”

For Robinson, she learned to combat thoughts of guilt and regret with truth.

“At one point, I asked myself, If I were offered a deal—to have my creative, loving boy for just thirteen years, and then grieve for him the rest of my life—would I take it? The answer was yes,” she said. “If that was so, then I could be thankful for the time I had with him, and for the privilege of being his mother.”

The many different faces of grief

Aprille Waldrop is a licensed clinical social worker/qualified supervisor. She’s also the social services manager of Hospice of Health First, which offers a series of bereavement and grief support groups to anyone in need, at no charge.

Waldrop says that each person’s experience with grief is unique, but commonly, after the death of a loved one, a person will sleep more, lack energy and have brain fog — all of the things that are symptoms of depression as well — and grief counselors can look at it and say “well, you’ve had a loss and that’s a normal reaction.”

However, if someone doesn’t allow themselves to grieve, Waldrop said they can “get stuck” in what she calls “complicated grief” and depression.

“A lot of people with depression never actually grieved, so they never went through those feelings,” Waldrop said. “You have to actually grieve and become sadder to be

able to cope and then move on — but there are always going to be moments of grief and that's normal.”

And there are many types of grief.

“We all experience grief in different ways,” Waldrop said. “We talk about it mainly when people have passed away that are close to us, our loved ones. But you can have grief over a dream, grief over a job, grief over a breakup.”

What to say to someone who is grieving

Waldrop says most importantly, address the loss. Acknowledge that this is a painful time in their life, with a statement like, “I'm so sorry for your loss.” And rather than just expressing sympathy, show empathy. For example, it's ok to say, “I don't have the right words, but I want you to know I'm here for you,” or “I can see how much you loved them, tell me about your favorite memory.” You can also offer active support by saying, “I don't want you to go through this alone — can I drop off dinner or sit with you this week?”

And finally, always let them lead, respect their desire to talk about it — or not.

“Sometimes silence is uncomfortable, but in the therapy world we call it “therapeutic silence,” Waldrop said. “It's okay to just be quiet — and be in that moment and that loss with them.”

As for what you shouldn't say — Waldrop advises you not downplay any aspect of the loss in an attempt to make them ‘feel better.’

“For example, when someone has a miscarriage, she says, “Sometimes people want to say things like, ‘Oh, but you can still have more kids, — and that's just not helpful.”

Grief as a Shared Journey

For Robinson, writing *FreeFall* became her way of reaching those who, even years later, still wrestle with loss.

“FreeFall was written ten years after the loss of our son. It was written for those who, even years later, still wrestle with the pain of grief,” she said. “Our culture doesn’t give those who experience significant loss the time to heal. It takes years. It changes us. And that is okay.”

For Sviben and her family, “Give Yourself a Reason” grew into a mission.

“I think it is essential in these challenging times to ensure that everyone knows these feelings are normal and should be discussed,” Sviben said. “When you grieve alone, that loneliness can be overwhelming. Give Yourself a Reason has become a mission, a mindset, and a reason to keep going... for Emily.”

Together, their stories highlight what National Grief Awareness Day is meant to honor — that grief is universal, but also deeply individual. It may leave people broken, searching, or forever changed. Yet in sharing their pain, families like Robinson’s and Dailey’s show that grief can also become a source of connection, purpose and even hope.

Hospice of Health First offers a wide array of free support groups and resources for those who are grieving. For more information [visit their website](#).

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