

# Fear and/or grief concerning the death of others

**Post by “Robert” of July 27, 2025 at 3:42 PM**

Hello everyone:

In my readings to this point, I've noticed that Epicurean therapy concerning death mostly relates to fear of our own death. The Epicurean argument is that we should not be afraid of it because we will lack sensation and perception after we have died. I find this argument convincing.

However, we will *not* lack sensation and perception when those around us die--e.g. friends, family, or pets. How does Epicureanism approach this problem? What are some relevant passages?

Nature shows us that people are resilient in the face of loss, but we usually go through a grieving process. Grief could be considered a kind of disturbance and thus a hindrance to attaining or sustaining ataraxia. How is this apparent dilemma addressed?

I have a hunch this is discussed in a thread somewhere on the site, so please feel free to direct me accordingly. 😊

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**Post by “Don” of July 27, 2025 at 4:36 PM**

Grief is a natural, human reaction to loss, and Epicurean philosophy accepts everyone will feel the sting of grief at the loss of a loved one.

The thing is not to be overwhelmed by the grief. The person who died can no longer feel anything. If they were in pain, they no longer feel pain.

The memory of the one who died is precious, and should be cherished, should bring pleasure.

Fragment 213. Sweet is the memory of a dead friend. ἡδὺ ἡ φίλου μνήμη τεθνηκότος

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## Post by “Cassius” of July 27, 2025 at 5:28 PM

And although it is not authentically ancient Epicurean, I think Frances Wright does an excellent job with the topic in her [Chapter 10](#):

### Quote

Death, then, is never our foe. When not a friend, he cannot be worse than indifferent. *For while we are, death is not; and when death is, we are not.* To be wise, then, death is nothing. Examine the ills of life; are they not of our own creation, or take they not their darkest hues from our passions or our ignorance? What is poverty, if “we have temperance, and can be satisfied with a crust, and a draught from the spring? — if we have modesty, and can wear a woolen garment as gladly as a tyrian robe? What is slander, if we have no vanity that it can wound, and no anger that it can kindle? What is neglect, if we have no ambition that it can disappoint, and no pride that it can mortify? What is persecution, if we have our own bosoms in which to retire, and a spot of earth to sit down and rest upon? What is death, when without superstition to clothe him with terrors, we can cover our heads, and go to sleep in his arms? What a list of human calamities are here expunged — poverty, slander, neglect, disappointment, persecution, death. What yet remains? Disease? That, too, we have shown temperance can often shun, and Philosophy can always alleviate.

*But there is yet a pain, which the wisest and the best of men cannot escape; that all of us, my sons, have felt, or have to feel. Do not your hearts whisper it? Do you not tell me, that in death there is yet a sting? That ere he aim at us, he may level the beloved of our soul? The father, whose tender care hath reared our infant minds — the brother, whom the same breast hath nourished, and the same roof sheltered, with whom, side by side, we have grown like two plants by a river, sucking life from the same fountain and strength from the same sun — the child whose gay prattle delights our ears, or whose opening understanding fixes our hopes — the friend of our choice, with whom we have exchanged hearts, and shared all our pains and pleasures, whose eye hath reflected the tear of sympathy, whose hand hath smoothed the couch of sickness. Ah! my sons, here indeed is a pain — a pain that cuts into the soul. There are masters that will tell you otherwise; who will tell you that it is unworthy of a man to mourn even here. But such, my sons, speak not the truth of experience or philosophy, but the subtleties of sophistry and pride. He who feels not the loss, hath never felt the possession. He who knows not the grief, hath never known the joy. See the price of a friend in the duties we render him, and the sacrifices we make to him, and which, in making, we count not sacrifices, but pleasures. We sorrow for his sorrow; we supply his wants, or, if we cannot, we share them. We follow him to exile. We close ourselves in his prison; we soothe him in sickness; we strengthen him in death: nay, if it be possible,*

we throw down our life for his. Oh! What a treasure is that for which we do so much! And is it forbidden to us to mourn its loss? If it be, the power is not with us to obey.

Should we, then, to avoid the evil, forego the good? Shall we shut love from our hearts, that we may not feel the pain of his departure? No; happiness forbids it. Experience forbids it. Let him who hath laid on the pyre the dearest of his soul, who hath washed the urn with the bitterest tears of grief — let him say if his heart hath ever formed the wish that it had never shrined within it him whom he now deplores. Let him say if the pleasures of the sweet communion of his former days doth not still live in his remembrance. If he love not to recall the image of the departed, the tones of his voice, the words of his discourse, the deeds of his kindness, the amiable virtues of his life. If, while he weeps the loss of his friend, he smiles not to think that he once possessed him. He who knows not friendship, knows not the purest pleasure of earth. Yet if fate deprive us of it, though we grieve, we do not sink; Philosophy is still at hand, and she upholds us with fortitude. And think, my sons, perhaps in the very evil we dread, there is a good; perhaps the very uncertainty of the tenure gives it value in our eyes; perhaps all our pleasures take their zest from the known possibility of their interruption. What were the glories of the sun, if we knew not the gloom of darkness? What the refreshing breezes of morning and evening, if we felt not the fervors of noon? Should we value the lovely-flower, if it bloomed eternally; or the luscious fruit, if it hung always on the bough? Are not the smiles of the heavens more beautiful in contrast with their frowns, and the delights of the seasons more grateful from their vicissitudes? Let us then be slow to blame nature, for perhaps in her apparent errors there is hidden a wisdom. Let us not quarrel with fate, for perhaps in our evils lie the seeds of our good. Were our body never subject to sickness, we might be insensible to the joy of health. Were our life eternal, our tranquillity might sink into inaction. Were our friendship not threatened with interruption, it might want much of its tenderness. This, then, my sons, is our duty, for this is our interest and our happiness; to seek our pleasures from the hands of the virtues, and for the pain which may befall us, to submit to it with patience, or bear up against it with fortitude. *To walk, in short, through life innocently and tranquilly; and to look on death as its gentle termination, which it becomes us to meet with ready minds, neither regretting the past, nor anxious for the future.*”

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### **Post by “Sam\_Qwerty” of July 27, 2025 at 8:05 PM**

I have found that you have to allow yourself to feel the grief before you can release it. Sometimes in our culture, expressing emotions is not considered macho. You don't have to cry in front of other men. You can wait until you are in private. But if you don't allow yourself to

ever cry, you will be carrying your grief around with you.

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### **Post by “Robert” of July 27, 2025 at 10:48 PM**

Thanks, everyone!

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### **Post by “Don” of July 27, 2025 at 11:14 PM**

#### [Quote from Sam Qwerty](#)

I have found that you have to allow yourself to feel the grief before you can release it. Sometimes in our culture, expressing emotions is not considered macho. You don't have to cry in front of other men. You can wait until you are in private. But if you don't allow yourself to ever cry, you will be carrying your grief around with you.

I'll agree that you don't *have to* cry in front of other men, but I reject wholeheartedly the stoic character that men are too often expected to maintain in our culture. I was at an extended-family event recently, and a young boy (4-6 years old?) hit his head under a table under which he was crawling around under. He was stoic, holding the top of his head, walked over to his grandmother and buried his head under her arm and cried. She said, "he doesn't like people to see him cry." My heart ached. I wanted to say "hey, it's okay to cry" but I didn't. Extended family and all. The son of the daughter of a cousin. That attitude instilled in this young boy, understandable from a societal perspective, does damage. Feeling feelings is human, it's a natural part of living. To say "it's not manly.. not macho... To cry" or even most times to show affection even, that does no one any good. Express the feelings you feel honestly.

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### **Post by “Adrastus” of July 28, 2025 at 5:41 AM**

In the ***Moral Letters to Lucilius***, which is a Stoic writing, they quote our Metrodorus of Lampsacus directly:

"There is certain pleasure akin to sadness."

I'll try to give some commentary

Given the [rest of the context of the letter](#), he seems to be talking about the loss of a loved one to death; and the author appears very indignant with Metrodorus' claim about finding pleasure in sadness, especially of the death of a loved one.

I'm not sure we know Metrodorus' full context in uttering this, but I do not doubt that there can be a mixing of pleasure and sadness in other pains as well as in the death of a loved one, when one's view of death is not colored by a sense of injustice at the nature of death itself rather than the purview of other humans. Vatican Saying 31, for me at least, conjures up this image of life and death that is inherently precarious and that we can do what we can within reason, but we cannot stop death should it descend on us.

"It is possible to provide security against other afflictions, but as far as death is concerned, we men all live in a city without walls" - VC 31

The Stoic writer of this **Letter to Lucilius** conjures up the image of one's own child on the funeral pyre, which to me is a form of polemic and pressing Metrodorus's claim to a breaking point. He also mentions the notion that Epicureans (perhaps?) may forget their loved ones and go about their lives never thinking of the dead, which doesn't appear to be accurate from the quotes elsewhere in this thread. I don't think Metrodorus' observation breaks though. I have felt a mixing of pain and pleasure in deaths of loved ones when I allowed myself to feel anything I was going to feel about their death without listening to appeals from virtue from inner judgements or caring about outer judgements. I also firmly believe that in embodying the Epicurean mindset (or the closest we may yet get to it), the shared experience of living pleasant experiences; and the cultivating of deeply pleasant relationships with others; and the further contemplation of them in our memories; that in these and other ways pleasure itself is the teleological goal of life. This teleological guide and goal of Pleasure is indeed salvific in that it soothes the pains of life, not by avoiding the realities of death; but in the earnestness with which we live and die.

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## Post by “Cassius” of July 28, 2025 at 7:35 AM

This passage from Seneca very much echoes Cicero's attack on pleasure in Tusculan Disputations. It also shows the importance of seeing Epicurus's wider definition of pleasure.

The ancient Stoics knew their Epicurus better than most Epicureans today, and certainly better than do modern Stoics. The ancient Stoics knew how critical it is to Stoicism (and to all enemies

of Epicurus) to obfuscate and reject Epicurus' wider view of pleasure.

Everything in Epicurean ethics turns on recognizing that all feeling which is not painful is pleasurable. Yes it is painful to lose a friend, but as Metrodorus says even in that circumstance there are non-painful pleasurable feelings that come with the remembrance of the dead friend. And Epicurus says that even the worst pains are to be dealt with by turning back to pleasure (properly understood), and focusing on the recognition that that which has been done cannot be undone.

#### Quote

VS55. We must heal our misfortunes by the grateful recollection of what has been, and by the recognition that it is impossible to undo that which has been done.

This is something I haven't focused on hard enough, and going through Tusculan Disputations is raising its importance in my mind. Epicurus teaches focusing instead on pleasure rather than constantly focusing on the pain and suffering as the Stoics (or at least the Cyreniacs) advise.

Thanks Adrastus for posting this because it is a good reminder of the point.

#### Quote

“Even at the moment when your son’s body is on the pyre, or your friend breathing his last, will you not suffer your pleasure to cease, rather than tickle your very grief with pleasure? Which is the more honourable—to remove grief from your soul, or to admit pleasure even into the company of grief? Did I say ‘admit’? Nay, I mean ‘chase after,’ and from the hands, too, of grief itself. **28**. Metrodorus says: ‘There is a certain pleasure which is related to sadness.’ We Stoics may say that, but you may not. The only Good which you<sup>[11]</sup> recognize, is pleasure, and the only Evil, pain; and what relationship can there be between a Good and an Evil? But suppose that such a relationship does exist; now, of all times, is it to be rooted out?<sup>[12]</sup> Shall we examine grief also, and see with what elements of delight and pleasure it is surrounded? **29**. Certain remedies, which are beneficial for some parts of the body, cannot be applied to other parts because these are, in a way, revolting and unfit; and that which in certain cases would work to a good purpose without any loss to one’s self-respect, may become unseemly because of the situation of the wound. Are you not, similarly, ashamed to cure sorrow by pleasure? No, this sore spot must be treated in a more drastic way. This is what you (METRODORUS?) should preferably advise: that no sensation of evil can reach one who is dead; for if it can reach him, he is not dead. **30**. And I say that nothing can hurt him who is as naught; for if a man can be hurt, he is alive. Do you think him to be badly off because he is no more, or because he still exists as somebody? And yet no torment can come to him from the fact that he is no more—for what feeling can belong to one who

does not exist?—nor from the fact that he exists; for he has escaped the greatest disadvantage that death has in it—namely, non-existence.

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### **Post by “Cassius” of July 28, 2025 at 7:41 AM**

Let me say again Adrastus thank you for posting that reference to Metrodorus and recommend to others that this is a great way of helping out on the forum.

We have many people (including me) who have limited reading experience in the secondary literature, especially people like Seneca or Cicero or Plutarch or Marcus Aurelius etc., who will regularly mix references to Epicureans into their standard fare of Stoicism or other viewpoints.

It helps everyone if those who are more fluent in the less-known sources will point out parallels such as Adrastus did here.

We really ought to have a section on "Writings/Sayings of Metrodorus" so that citations like this can be collected in one place.

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of July 28, 2025 at 2:34 PM**

Here is a modern psychology take on grief:

[Five stages of grief - Wikipedia](#)

Quote

...those experiencing sudden grief following an abrupt realization (shock) go through five emotions: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

Critics of the model have warned against using it too literally.

And which could also be said, that not everyone will experience these stages or in this order.

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### **Post by “Kalosyni” of July 28, 2025 at 3:11 PM**

About a month ago I experienced the loss of a pet, and I wrote down some notes after a number of days had passed. Here expressed in very abstract terms, and with some additional editing, are some thoughts about the "existential experience of grief".

- 1) The reality of death - seeing with one's own eyes the physical nature of death. Reflecting on this, one sees that all living beings including oneself will one day die - we are indeed mortal.
- 2) The tragedy, pain, and suffering of the deceased as they went through the process of dying - and the question: "Could the death have been prevented?".
- 3) The loss - coming to terms with the expectation that the loved one would always be near, and realizing that there had been an attitude of "possessing/owning". (Specific to this situation: "my baby kitty".)
- 4) Dealing with the day-to-day experience of not having the loved one in one's life - Adjusting. Remembering the good and happy moments from the past.
- 5) Re-directing love and attention - taking time to focus on and care for those who are still alive.

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### **Post by "Sam\_Qwerty" of July 29, 2025 at 8:13 AM**

Sometimes there is guilt at feeling pleasure or happiness after a loved one passed away. I told myself, "how can I feel happy after losing my father?" But he wouldn't have wanted me to stop living just because he is no longer alive.

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### **Post by "Don" of July 29, 2025 at 11:07 AM**

#### [Quote from Sam\\_Qwerty](#)

Sometimes there is guilt at feeling pleasure or happiness after a loved one passed away. I told myself, "how can I feel happy after losing my father?" But he wouldn't have wanted me to stop living just because he is no longer alive.

Agreed. I've actually found over the last few funerals I've been to, that sharing stories about the one who died, especially when coupled with photos or a slide show of photos, is helpful and

bittersweet, and pleasurable. Giving people a conversation starter with the photos is good. The first time I remember this is putting together the photos for my grandmother's funeral. Family joined in. But after the funeral, it can be hard. Epicurus' philosophy drives home though the preciousness of life, both remembering the life of the one who died and the life we go on living. We should not feel guilty for going on living. The dead live through our memories of them. That's the only afterlife we get. Famous people may leave books and writing and now video and audio, but they're still only memories.

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## **Post by “Robert” of July 29, 2025 at 12:36 PM**

[Quote from Don](#)

[Quote from Sam Qwerty](#)

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It also, I think, drives home the importance of cultivating good relationships with people while they are alive. The more joyful the relationship, the more consoling are the memories. And when you lose someone with whom you're estranged to some degree, the sting is that much more painful.

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## **Post by “Kalosyni” of August 5, 2025 at 7:59 PM**

Godfrey wrote this very good post on grief over in another thread:

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/4641-fear-and-or-grief-concerning-the-death-of-others/>

Post

**[RE: Episode 292 - TD22 - Is Virtue Or Pleasure The Key To Overcoming Grief?](#)**

A sidebar on grief, and its many layers...

One aspect to consider, which I think can only follow after the wailing war widow phase, is to parse out what exactly you are grieving. Is it for your loved one's experience of being no more? Are you grieving for yourself, as you live in loneliness? Is it the fear of moving on, and in doing so losing your memories of your loved one? Is it grief for what the deceased will never have a chance to do?

Then there's the practical aspect of moving forward and...



Godfrey

August 5, 2025 at 6:07 PM