



Saskatchewan  
**Health Authority**



# Grief and Bereavement Information

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**CS-PIER-0135**  
**JANUARY 2024**



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## Ten Things to Know About Grief

When you are grieving it helps to know what to expect. Although your grief is unique to your relationship with the person who died, there are some common themes. Our staff, volunteers, and bereaved people identified the ten things discussed below as important in understanding your grief.

### 1. Global effect of loss

The death of someone very close to you can be a life transforming event that effects all aspects of yourself and your life. It can feel as if your world has been shattered. The grief process is the journey between how things were and how they will be. It is an interior journey, like a labyrinth, moving toward central issues of meaning.

### 2. Grief is a natural process

The grief you feel at the death of someone important to you is the consequence of living and loving, of your meaningful connections with others. Grief is a normal part of life and a natural response to loss. Information about the phases of grief can help you to understand the responses that you experience.

### 3. Individual differences in grieving styles

Although grief has some definable outlines, how you grieve is a unique result of your personality, your past history of loss, and the relationship that you had with the person who died. Each person in your family will grieve in their own way and with their own timetable. To cope with their grief, some people will openly express the emotions that they experience while others will control their thoughts and emotions. Neither of these styles is right or wrong; each can be an effective way through grief.

### 4. Children and grief

Children look to the important adults in their lives to learn how to grieve. They are sensitive to the moods and behaviour of the adults around them and will not talk about their thoughts and feelings of loss unless the adults do. Children are frightened by what they do not know or understand, so simple information about death and grief is helpful to them.

### 5. Social connections and support

When you are grieving you want and need support from others now more than ever. Due to awkwardness or their own feelings of grief, some people may not be able to provide the understanding and caring that you expected from them. Because all of the relationships in your life will be altered in some way after a major loss, it is normal to look at, change or, sometimes, end certain relationships. You may find that the company of other bereaved people is particularly comforting.

## **6. Experiences you might have in grief**

When you are actively grieving, you can feel very different from your usual self as your emotions, your mind, and your reactions seem unreliable. It is possible that you are feeling intense pain and emotions that you have never felt before. You are not going crazy; this is a natural part of grief. Responses such as fatigue, forgetfulness and irritability result from your attention and energy being directed toward your grief and adjustment to loss.

## **7. Fluctuations in the grief process**

As you journey along the path of grief, you will find that your feelings and responses vary at different times and phases of the process. There will be unpredictable ups and downs that may be felt as waves of grief or as good days and bad days. It is important to understand and value the good days as breaks or rests in your particular journey.

## **8. Self-care and what helps**

There are things that you can do to help yourself at this challenging time. Getting information about grief can help you to understand your responses and your journey. Be gentle and patient with yourself as you grieve. Do what you can to keep some normal routine for health and social contact. Support may come from a variety of sources: family, friends, bereavement groups, chat rooms, etc. If you are concerned about yourself and your grief, seek professional counselling help.

## **9. Time for grief**

Despite what you may hear about 'getting over it' or 'the first year', there are no time lines for grief; it takes as long as it takes. Often your grief journey is longer than you or other people expected and you may feel pressure to be better than you are by now, whenever this is. It is certain that this loss will continue to be part of your life and that you will always have times when you think about, miss, and grieve for the person who died.

## **10. Grief as a spiritual journey of healing**

The death of someone significant in your life brings change that puts you on a different life path. Nothing will ever be the same, yet you must somehow go on and find meaning in the new path before you. As the journey continues, you may experience healing and personal growth as a result of the suffering you have endured and the lessons that you have learned about what you truly value.

## Grief: Understanding Your Emotions

### The Feelings of Grief

When someone close to you dies, you grieve. Grief is the road that you travel from how things were to how things will be. On this journey, you may have different or stronger feelings than you have had before. You may wonder if what you are feeling is normal.

Your feelings may surprise, frighten or embarrass you, showing up at times or in ways that you do not expect. It may be that you find yourself crying more – or less – than you expected. You may have deep feelings that you can not or do not want to show.

Feelings can be uncomfortable but they are not harmful. Remember that feelings are neither good, nor bad, right nor wrong – they are just feelings. They are a normal and necessary part of grief. Instead of trying to stop them, trust that just as each one comes, it will also go.

Whatever your feelings, they are tied to the particular relationship or connection that you had with the person who died. In the sections that follow, some common emotions are identified along with suggestions to help you make room for the feelings you may have.

If you are experiencing other feelings, you may still find some of this information useful. If you find that you are continuing to struggle with your feelings, consider meeting with a bereavement counsellor to find new ways of coping.

### Sorrow

The pain of sorrow is heartache. You may feel that your heart is broken or injured. You may feel as though you are no longer a whole person. You may express your sorrow outwardly through weeping, crying, sobbing or wailing; or you may pour your sorrow less visibly into activities that may be ordinary or special to you.

You may long for the person who has died to be with you again. You may miss the sharing of day-to-day life or the sense of closeness that comes from loving and being loved by someone. You may miss being able to provide and receive care. There may be times when the person's absence seems overpowering. You may feel as though there is an enormous hole in your life or that you simply do not belong anywhere now.

Some other words that you might use to describe sorrow include sadness, emptiness or loneliness.

### What May Help:

- Honour your sadness. Accept that it is a natural and unavoidable part of having loved someone and that it is part of your life right now.
- Share your experiences. You may want to share your sadness with friends, family or members of a grief support group; or you may prefer to use the internet, or take up a project or activity that allows you to maintain a greater sense of privacy.
- Express your sorrow. It is important to find ways that meet your needs and match your personality. You may need a regular time and place to feel sad and to cry, such as in your morning shower or at the grave; or you may need time to quietly meditate or reflect while walking in nature. If you want to express strong emotions, avoid doing this too close to bedtime since this can disturb your sleep.

- Create ways of remembering. Find ways that help you to remember and honour the person who died. Talk or write to him, celebrate her birthday, put up a Christmas stocking, display photographs, talk about him or her.

## Hopelessness and Despair

As you face changes resulting from your loss, it may seem that your world has changed so much that you barely recognize it. You may feel that all you held most dear has been lost. Some people describe their feelings as ‘being lost’ or ‘in a dark place.’ Other people feel tired and unmotivated. Things that once mattered may now seem pointless. You may feel as if your world is falling apart and you’ll never feel happy again.

Dealing with your grief may be harder than you expected and it may be difficult to put your feelings into words. You may feel depressed and have trouble keeping up your normal routines. You may feel that life no longer holds any purpose for you and wonder how long you can go on this way. You may even hope to die or have thoughts of ending your life.

If your mood is low, dark or numb most or all of the time, you may be depressed (as well as grieving). Most often these empty, hopeless feelings lessen as people begin to “see light in the tunnel” and re-engage with the world.

### **What May Help:**

- Accept and honour your feelings. Although it may not be apparent to you, you are in the midst of an important transition. This can be a time to reflect on the past and how it can help you to create your future.
- Let others know and help. Spend time with others who have been through a similar experience and survived it. This could include family members or friends; or you may want to join a bereavement support group. Even characters in movies or books can fill this role.
- Do what is right for you. It is important to give thought and time to whatever is good for you. Identify what you need: It might be rest or quiet time; or it might be physical or social activity. Staying in touch with the rhythms of the natural world and the cycle of life can be restorative and inspiring. You may also want to record your thoughts, observations and progress in some way.
- Talk to your family doctor. If your mood is often down or you are having thoughts of ending your life, seek help as soon as possible from your family doctor or hospital emergency department. Crisis lines can also provide telephone support:
  - ⇒ [Saskatchewan HealthLine 811](#)- HealthLine 811 is a confidential, 24-hour health, mental health and addictions advice, education and support telephone line available to the people of Saskatchewan. It is staffed by experienced and specially trained Registered Nurses, Registered Psychiatric Nurses, and Registered Social Workers. HealthLine 811 is free.
- ⇒ [Saskatchewan 211 24 Hour Crisis Hotlines](#)- 211 Saskatchewan is a free, confidential, 24/7 service that connects individuals to human services in the province by telephone, text, or web chat, plus a searchable website with over 5,000 listings of social, community, non-clinical health, and government services across the province.



## Guilt and Blame

The time leading up to someone's death is often confusing, exhausting, stressful and filled with unclear and difficult choices. Under such circumstances, it's often impossible to make good choices or to know the 'right' thing to do.

While grieving, it is natural to keep re-examining what has happened, including your part in it. You may have many 'what if' or 'why' questions. You may be wondering about 'if only.' You may have regrets about things done and not done, or said and not said.

If you are feeling angry with others, you may be trying to understand what happened: What exactly was the cause of death? Were any warning signs missed or not taken seriously enough?

Feelings of guilt or blame often come from a belief that everything in life happens for a reason. Something life-changing has happened and you are trying to understand how and why. You may blame yourself or others, even though you know there isn't any one thing or person to blame. If you are someone who likes to always get things right, feelings of guilt or blame may be especially hard for you.

Feelings of guilt and blame about the death may also come up if you don't feel good about who you are or what you have to offer others. If your relationship with the person who died was difficult, you may feel guilty about times when you wished him or her dead.

Feelings of guilt and blame are often tied to ideas about how you or other people should be. Perhaps you are telling yourself you should feel more sad or less angry, or that you shouldn't be grieving in this way or for so long. Often these 'shoulds' are the echoes of what you've been hearing from family and friends.

It is also possible that your feelings of guilt are grounded in reality: As a caregiver, you may have been tired and said something hurtful or not listened to a complaint. Perhaps you did or did not do something that contributed to someone's pain, illness or death.

### **What May Help:**

- Examine your guilt. Pay attention to what you say to yourself and about yourself. Describe what you feel guilty about and examine it. Look at what you are guilty of – the real part – and decide what you need to do about this.
- Forgive yourself or others. Feelings of guilt or blame can keep you stuck in your grief. Ask yourself if these feelings are helping you to be the person you want to be. If not, find ways to forgive. When guilt or blame surface, practice letting go, as you are ready.
- Do a reality check. Ask trusted friends and family if they have ever experienced something similar and find out how they handled the situation. Also talk to other people who were involved and find out if anyone sees things differently than you do. Recall not only the times when you or someone else failed, but also those times when you or they did or said what was needed.

- Take action. Once you have carefully examined your feelings, you may still feel there is good reason for your guilt. In this situation you may want to find ways to make amends, for example, by volunteering with, making a donation to or learning more about a cause that mattered to the person who died. You might also decide to make a change in your lifestyle or behaviour based on what you have learned.

## **Anger**

Anger can be a natural and common response to loss. It is a normal reaction at times when you feel powerless, frustrated or wronged in some way. Even so, it may be difficult for you and others to accept or tolerate the expression of angry feelings.

Your anger may be directed at a certain person, agency or policy. There may (or may not) be valid reasons for this. You may feel that someone should be accountable for actions taken or not taken, such as medical treatment or other decisions. You may feel disillusioned or let down by the care provided to the person who died by a physician or other service provider. You may feel angry with the person who died for not taking better care of him- or herself. You may feel angry with family members for what they did or didn't do or say. You may feel angry with yourself, thinking that there was something you should or should not have done or said. You may feel angry with God.

It is also possible that you may feel angry and not know (or not want to know) who you are angry with or what you are angry about. For example, you may simply be angry that the person died and you can not see or speak or talk with him or her anymore. In these instances, you may try to tell yourself that you should not feel angry; but when anger is not understood or expressed, it can become more intense and unpredictable. You may find yourself exploding in situations where normally you would not.

Anger can protect or distract you from other, painful feelings, such as sadness, loneliness or despair. If you are not yet ready to feel these other emotions, anger can be a way to hold them back. This is not wrong – it is just a way of coping.

Some other words that might describe your anger are irritation, frustration, resentment, upset, tiredness or disappointment.

### **What May Help:**

- Be safe. Take steps to prevent your anger from hurting you or other people. Learn about what you can do with these feelings when they surface: Go for a walk or spend time in a soothing environment. Stop activities such as driving. Take a few slow breaths. Try writing or journaling about whatever is on your mind. You might need to take a 'time out' by putting some distance between you and someone else. Tell the other person you need time out and when you will return. Then walk away.
- Defuse your anger. Find ways to safely let the steam off. Physical activities that use big muscle groups are great. Try racket sports, running, yoga or aerobics. If your physical health is not strong, you might try gentler activities such as walking, stretching or swimming. Repetitive actions are good: Hammering, chopping, digging and kneading can help to release some of the energy that builds up with anger.



- Express yourself. Tell the whole story. Be specific about all of your thoughts and feelings. Tell the story until you are clear about your anger: What and who is it about? Try doing this through letter writing, journaling, art projects or conversation with a counsellor or trusted friend. This may help you to see the situation more clearly and to decide if you need or want to do anything about it.
- Take constructive action. Once you have found clarity about your anger and what you want to do, identify the specific steps you need to take. You might send a letter to someone or you might work towards creating a change in education, policy or procedure. This may also be a time for forgiveness, letting go or acceptance of what can not be changed.

## **Fear, Worry and Anxiety**

Fear is a powerful emotion. When you feel afraid, you may have strong physical reactions such as a racing or pounding heart, rapid breathing, sweaty hands or upset stomach. You may also feel nervous, anxious, panicky or tearful.

Fear usually alerts you to a danger but when you are grieving, you may feel afraid even though there seems to be no danger present. You may feel anxious about leaving your home, going to new places or being around people. You may also be afraid of the intensity of your own emotions and wonder if you are going crazy. You may worry about losing control, thinking that if you let your feelings out you will not be able to stop them.

You may feel scared by certain thoughts or memories of the person who died, their illness or their death. You may worry that these memories are all you have left of the person. You may also worry about illnesses or risks that normally would not concern you, or you may have thoughts that you or another person in your life will die. These worries and fears are a natural response to your experience with someone else's death, and will gradually lessen over time.

### **What May Help:**

- Name your fear. Any time you feel fearful or worried, stop what you are doing and simply notice. Breathe slowly and deeply, and ask yourself, "What is going on with me right now?" If you think you are having anxiety or panic attacks, ask your doctor or a counsellor for help and advice.
- Ask questions and take action. Ask yourself questions such as: "Am I doing or not doing anything to cause myself to feel scared or worried? What do I need right now? Is there anything I can do at this time to dispel or lessen my fear? Is there anywhere I can go? Who can help and what can they do? What other kinds of help are available to me?" Using these questions, order your thoughts, and then take small, focused steps to lessen your fears or worries. As you begin to take action, you may find that your feelings change.
- Identify what helps you. Pay attention to what helps you feel better or worse. Does it feel better to be alone or with other people? Does it help to tell yourself that you are safe, that there is no danger, that you are OK? Is there a person you can call or some physical activity you can do, such as going for a walk or cleaning the house? Would it help to hold on to someone or something for comfort such as a partner, pillow, teddy bear or pet? Would a bath or massage help? Is prayer, music or meditation a comfort?

- Learn breathing and relaxation techniques. For example, throughout the day, take time to breathe slowly and deeply. Take a big breath in through your nose and let it out through your mouth with a sigh. Repeat until you feel more relaxed.

## **Making Room for Your Feelings**

Whatever feelings you may have, remember that they are just feelings and that they will come and go. One thing you can count on is that your feelings will change. You will not always feel the way you do right now. Eventually, the strong emotions that are so difficult now will ease their hold on you, making life easier again.

## **Grief: Coping with Challenges**

### **Introduction**

The death of someone important to you brings many changes in your life. As you are adjusting to these changes, there may also be challenges. Some of these will be practical in nature; others will be emotional. In the pages that follow, you will find information, ideas and suggestions to help you with these challenges.

### **Decision-Making**

It can be difficult to make decisions – even small ones – when you are grieving. This may be especially true when it is your partner who has died and you do not have the usual person there to discuss plans, consider options and share decisions. Your memory, concentration and thinking may be affected by grief, leaving you feeling less sure of yourself than usual.

#### **What May Help:**

If possible, delay major decisions until you feel comfortable and confident about making them. If you can not wait to make a decision, the following guidelines may help you:

- Talk about the decision with a person you trust. This might be a professional, family member or friend.
- Explain the problem and your goal as clearly as possible.
- Make a list of as many solutions as you can think of. Note the pros and cons and all the steps needed for each solution.
- Review all the information and look for anything you may have missed.
- Choose the best option from your list.
- Follow through step by step.

## Financial Affairs

Settling an estate is difficult for most grieving people. You may feel worried that you do not have the knowledge you need to deal with these financial and legal matters. You may need or want help as you pay bills, make decisions about money or real estate, or plan for your future.

### **What May Help:**

The following guidelines may help you to make good decisions and avoid later regrets:

- Take your time and be cautious when making decisions.
- Ask a reputable lawyer, accountant or financial advisor for help.
- Ask your bank or credit union for help.
- Ask trusted friends for recommendations; but use your own good judgment as well.
- If you can not get a recommendation for a particular professional, ask for references and professional affiliations.
- Before making any final decisions, review your plans with a trusted professional.

## Personal Belongings

You may experience powerful memories and emotions while going through the personal belongings of someone who has died, making the task seem overwhelming. You may not have the energy or you may feel unable to decide what to do with them. You may feel comforted by some of these items and find the idea of “getting rid of” them to be very painful.

Sometimes, other family members will have different thoughts about this task than you do. It is important to talk about these differences openly, keeping in mind that compromise might be necessary.

### **What May Help:**

There is no particular time when you must take on this task, so it is OK to wait to do it when you feel more ready.

- Take your time. Do what feels right to you.
- You may find it easier to do this task a bit at a time; or you may want to set aside some time to do it all at once.
- Sort things into groups: things to keep; things for family and friends; things for sale or charity; things to decide about later.
- Ask friends or family members to help you.

## Memories and Reminders

You may find yourself thinking over and over about past events. This is natural and can help you to come to terms with what has happened. You may also find it difficult to spend time in certain places that carry memories for you. Over time, this will likely become easier as the intensity of your feelings and painful memories lessen.

### **What May Help:**

Allow yourself to go over memories unless this begins to seriously interfere with your everyday life. Know that visiting familiar places may be difficult and do what you can to make this easier.

- Share your memories with others who will just listen – friends, family or members of a bereavement support group.
- If you have questions about the care received by the person who died or about their illness or final hours, contact a healthcare provider who can talk about this with you.
- If you are troubled by thoughts about what you or others did or did not do, talk to a trusted friend, a bereavement volunteer or a bereavement counsellor.
- As you are adjusting to life without the person who died, you may want to change your routines or schedules. For example, you could sleep or eat in different rooms than you did before. You may also find it helpful to re-arrange some of your furniture or temporarily put away sentimental objects.
- It is OK for you to avoid certain places for awhile.
- If you need to re-visit a place that holds painful memories for you, ask someone you trust to go with you.

## Changes in Relationships

After someone dies, other relationships may also change. You may notice that some people behave differently around you. You may be surprised or disappointed by things they say or do – or do not do. Perhaps some people you were counting on have not been there for you, while other people have unexpectedly come forward to offer their support. It is also possible that you may not want to visit with people while you are grieving, especially if you worry that your true feelings will be a burden to others.

### **What May Help:**

It is important that you pay attention to your changing needs and responses, and take steps to find the support you need.

- Spend time with welcoming people who are OK with your grief.
- Let people know what is—and is not—helpful to you.
- Tell supportive friends about the things you find difficult, and ask for their help. (For example, if you feel you can not make plans too far in advance, ask if you can have the option to change your mind later or leave early.)
- Say no to people or plans that you do not feel ready for.
- Think about joining a grief support group.

## Dreams and Visitations

You may have dreams that seem real or sense the presence of the person who has died. This may be a comfort to you or you may find it upsetting. It is also possible that you may long for a dream or visit from the person who died but not have it.

### **What May Help:**

Remind yourself that these experiences – or lack of them – are normal.

- If you often wake up in distress after a dream about the person, learn meditation or relaxation techniques.
- If you are troubled during the day by images or feelings, do some physical exercise: Walk, run, swim or paddle; go to the gym.
- If you are curious about your experiences and want to know more about them, write them down in a journal and make time to think about them.
- If you wonder whether your experiences are normal but feel hesitant about speaking to someone about them, seek out a trusted friend, counsellor or other grieving person.

## Looking after Your Health

While you are grieving, you may not have the energy to look after yourself; but it is important that you make an effort to do so. You are at greater risk of illness and accident due to stress, fatigue and distraction. You may not be eating or sleeping as you normally would. As much as possible, it is important to eat and sleep regularly. Avoid unhelpful or harmful coping patterns or people.

### **What May Help:**

Take time to notice how connected your body, thoughts, feelings and beliefs are.

## General

- Visit your family doctor; inform him or her that you are grieving.
- Your energy level will go up and down. Pace yourself.
- Exercise regularly. Choose something you can stick with and enjoy.
- This might be a time when you are tempted to use alcohol or drugs to escape the pain of your grief. Be careful in your use of medications, alcohol and other drugs since these can interfere with the natural grieving process.

## **Sleep**

- If you have trouble falling or staying asleep –
  - ♦ Avoid alcohol and caffeine, and refrain from watching television or engaging in physical exercise in the evening.
  - ♦ Try natural remedies such as herbal teas, warm milk, soothing baths, quiet music or relaxation exercises. Prescription medicines can help temporarily or on occasion.
  - ♦ You may also find it helpful to change your sleeping habits for awhile (example: sleep in a different room or on the other side of the bed; go to bed later; sleep with an extra pillow or a stuffed animal for comfort).
  - ♦ Read something light and easy such as a magazine; or recall a favourite scene or trip in as much detail as possible. You might also try “daydreaming” – plan a trip or plot a novel. Just be sure to avoid any activity that is stimulating.
  - ♦ After 30 minutes, get up and do something pleasant and relaxing for a few minutes.
  - ♦ If you can not get or return to sleep, let go of any effort to sleep and tell yourself that you are simply going to rest.
- If you are sleeping more than usual –
  - ♦ Remind yourself that this can be normal for a grieving person, and that it is temporary.
  - ♦ As much as possible, limit your activities and responsibilities so as to conserve your energy.
  - ♦ Notice when or where you feel most sleepy.
  - ♦ As much as possible, give yourself time for extra sleep: Try to nap or rest as needed.

## **Eating**

- Even if you do not feel hungry, eat small amounts of healthy foods to give you energy. You may also want to add a vitamin or nutritional drink.
- If you feel more hungry than usual, eat healthy snacks and meals such as fruits, nuts and vegetables. Avoid snacking on ‘junk food.’
- If making meals is difficult for you, try some ready-made, healthy meals from a grocery store or food catering service. Keep some healthy snacks on hand.
- If eating alone is difficult, eat in a different room or sit at a different spot at the table. Accept meal invitations from supportive friends or invite them in for take-out meals. You might consider letting trusted friends know about your difficulties and asking them to help out in any way they can. Think about setting a regular lunch or dinner date with family or friends. For example, this could be once a month or once a week.
- If you have never prepared meals before, contact your local recreational or seniors’ centre to ask about cooking classes or sharing kitchens.

## Grief: What Makes it Difficult?

### What is “Difficult” about Grief?

Grief is rarely easy. Sometimes grief can feel very complicated, overwhelming or long-lasting. You may feel unable to cope; you may feel stuck; you may wonder if it will ever end. You may feel that you no longer know who you are or that your world has changed. This can happen soon after a death or it may happen later.

Even “normal” grief can sometimes seem difficult. Why is this? There are many reasons, such as the following:

- Circumstances or nature of the death
- Lack of support or understanding by those around you
- Competing demands and responsibilities
- Multiple losses
- History of depression, anxiety, trauma, abuse or addiction

Any of these can make your grieving process more difficult. The information provided here is intended to help you to understand your grief and create ways to cope with it. Not all of this information will be relevant to your situation. Look for what seems useful to you right now.

Here are some general tips for dealing with “difficult” grief:

- Seek and accept offers of practical and emotional support (example: prepared meals, transportation, nonjudgmental listening).
- Look for ways to honour your memory of the person who has died.
- Find people and places where you can freely and safely express your feelings; or record your thoughts and feelings privately through journaling or audio recording.
- As much as you can, be patient with and kind to yourself. Remind yourself that you are in a difficult situation and that you are doing the best that you can.
- Remind yourself that you are the best expert about your grief. Your grief is what you say it is because you are the one experiencing it.

## Circumstances or Nature of the Death

Certain kinds of death, by their very nature, are generally more difficult to grieve than others. You may feel strong emotions, or you may feel numb or have difficulty believing that the death is real. Examples of these kinds of death include:

- Intentional traumatic deaths, such as suicide or homicide – These deaths are usually disturbing because of the suffering involved. If you are grieving a death by murder or suicide, you may have questions that can not be fully answered. You may ask, “Why?” and wonder if there is something more you could or should have done.
- Accidental deaths, such as motor vehicle accidents, drownings or plane crashes – Again, these deaths often leave a grieving person with upsetting images and unanswered questions.
- Untimely deaths, such as the death of a child – Most parents expect to outlive their children. The death of a child upsets a sense of natural order, which can lead you to question your beliefs or shake your trust in life.
- Ambiguous deaths, such as when the person’s body is not found – Putting a body to rest is often the last chance to say goodbye to someone. When there is no body, you may feel that you do not have closure.
- Sudden, unexpected deaths, such as heart attacks, aneurysms, medical failures or accidents – When you have had no time to prepare or say goodbye, you may experience additional longing, regret, guilt or anger. You may have difficulty deciding whether or not someone is to blame—including yourself.

### **What May Help:**

- Understand that it may take more time to accept this reality.
- Having detailed information about the death and what happened may help you to accept that the death has happened.
- Remind yourself that some degree of “denial,” numbness or disbelief can be a healthy way to cope.
- If you find that you are blaming yourself for the death, talk with a trusted friend or professional who will hear you out while offering support and reassurance.
- If you feel overwhelmed by the number of calls or inquiries from people, ask someone you trust to keep others informed of your needs and wishes and to receive messages on your behalf.



## **Lack of Support or Understanding by Those Around You**

No matter how the death happened, most grieving people need and hope for emotional and practical support. Unfortunately, it is not always offered. Below are some reasons why this might happen:

- In general, our culture is fast-paced and used to “quick fixes.” If your grief lasts longer than other people think it should, you may begin to feel left behind and alone. You may also wonder if there is something wrong with you.
- If your usual support people are also grieving, they may be unable to give you the support you need. Because everyone grieves in their own way, family or friends may not understand or be able to respond to your needs at this time.
- You may find that people who have had no personal experience with loss and grief are unsure or unaware of how to help you.
- If your relationship with the person who died was secret or met with disapproval by friends and family, you may feel that you are silenced in your grief – that there is no place for it. (This is sometimes called “disenfranchised grief.”)

### **What May Help:**

- Remind yourself that grief is not something to be hurried or “fixed.” No one else can set a timeline for your grief.
- Be understanding of other people who are grieving this same death. If they are unable to support you, find other people who can.
- If you are feeling alone in your grief, reach out to trusted friends, family, professionals or a support group.
- Remember that what others say about grief and loss may be true for them, but that does not necessarily make it right for you.

## **Competing Demands and Responsibilities**

Life goes on in spite of grief. This is a time when you need to do some re-balancing: Grief may take energy that will no longer be available for other work. At the same time, you may have duties, obligations or responsibilities that will not go away, in which case you may need to put some of your grieving “on hold.”

- You may feel pressured to return to work or school before you are ready.
- You may have caregiving responsibilities – for example, children or aging parents.
- You may have additional responsibilities as a result of the death, such as running a business, selling property or settling an estate.

### **What May Help:**

- If taking a leave of absence is not possible, consider other ways to reduce your workload. Are there other tasks that you could give up, even temporarily? Could friends or family take over some of your work for awhile (example: cooking or cleaning)?
- Give thought to which caregiving responsibilities you absolutely must do and which you could let go of for now. Is there anyone else who could take on some of these or help with them for a short while?
- Remind yourself that some tasks are short lived and must be completed immediately, while others can wait. Set priorities and try to pace yourself.
- You may need to put parts of your grief “on hold” while you complete a task. If this happens, make sure that there is time for your grief later.

## **Multiple Losses**

You may have experienced other losses and other deaths recently or long ago. Although each of these will have been different, you may find that this latest death has had a much bigger impact on you than you expected. You may feel numb or you may feel overwhelmed by emotions that link one loss to another. Some of the other losses that may now be affecting you include:

- Non-death losses – such as a divorce or separation, job loss, a move or retirement
- Unresolved bereavements – such as an earlier death that you may not have been able to grieve.
- Cumulative grief – such as another significant death or a number of deaths or losses that happened recently or close together.
- Secondary losses – such as a loss of a role, home, income, friendships or faith.

### **What May Help:**

- Learn to balance time for grieving with time for resting, distraction or activity.
- Identify other losses. Look for themes: How are these losses linked together? How are they similar? How are they different?
- Re-visit earlier deaths and allow yourself to grieve what you lost.
- Make room for healing and rebuilding. Take time for what you need.
- Seek support or solitude according to your needs and coping style.

## History of Depression, Anxiety, Trauma, Abuse or Addiction

Grief can leave you vulnerable to setbacks if you have – or have had – difficulties with depression, anxiety, trauma, abuse or addiction. It can be hard to know what is your grief and what is, for example, a return to depression.

- Some people experience a degree of depression and/or anxiety while grieving. Usually, this is not severe or long-lasting.
- Memories of traumatic or abusive experiences may re-surface when you are grieving. You may have strong or confusing feelings related to those experiences.
- Addictive patterns may return or intensify while you are grieving. Addictions are often an attempt to cope, so while grieving you may find yourself drawn to an old – or new – addiction.

### **What May Help:**

- Many people manage depression and anxiety through self-talk, meditation, physical activity or relaxation exercises. However, if you find that your daily functioning is negatively affected or if you feel that you are at risk of a relapse, make an appointment with your doctor. Even short-term use of medications can sometimes be helpful.
- You may need time and assistance to sort out how old losses from past trauma or abuse are affecting you in the present. Particularly where the person who has died was abusive towards you, your feelings may change unpredictably. For example, you may feel anger one moment and intense sadness the next.
- Remind yourself of all that you have learned about your addiction and how this coping mechanism has not been helpful to you. Use tools you have learned to help you cope and stay healthy. Reach out to supports that have been there for you in the past.

## Intense Relationship with the Person Who Died

Death brings an end to a life, but not necessarily to the relationship you had with the person who died. If you had either a particularly close or an especially troubled relationship with the person who died, you may experience difficulties when grieving. For example, you may feel guilty about going on with your life without that person; or you may feel angry that you never received an apology from someone who hurt you.

- You may feel you have “unfinished business” – that the person died before you had a chance to say or do something that was important to you.
- You may struggle with unexpected feelings or thoughts, such as relief that the person is dead or surprise that you’re still angry with them.
- You may not have the support of other family members who had a different relationship with the person who has died.

### **What May Help:**

- Identify and explore any unresolved issues between you and the person who died.
- Make room for all of your feelings, whatever they may be.
- Identify resources, supports and options that may help you.
- Remember that your relationship with the person who died is unique, and no one else can tell you what your grief “should” be.

### **“Getting Stuck”**

At some point, many grieving people feel that they are “stuck.” To you or others in your life it may seem that nothing has changed or you may feel disappointed that you are not “better.” Even though this can be part of the normal grieving process, it can be confusing. Remind yourself that there is often more going on “under the surface” and that you are moving at a pace that is right for you. If you are feeling really concerned or frustrated about your grief, this may be a time when it would help to talk with a counsellor.

### **What May Help:**

- Be patient and remain open to change. This may be a time to rest or slow down.
- Find ways to control upsetting thoughts and emotions, and to pace your grieving. Seek help with this if you need it.
- Learn to conserve your energy and reduce stress by setting realistic goals and priorities.
- Pursue new interests. Explore physical and creative activities that may help to discharge or re-direct powerful emotions.
- Look carefully for signs that your grief has changed.
- Seek out supportive individuals or groups who can help you see that your grief is normal and that you are not going crazy.

### **Trust Yourself**

As much as possible and as difficult as it might be, it is important to listen to and learn from your own heart. You may find that in the midst of your suffering and confusion, there is an inner wisdom that you can – and should – trust. This does not mean that you should ignore what others say; but it is important to weigh their opinions and advice against what you know about yourself.

## Grief: Special Days and Holidays

### Grief: Special Days and Holidays

After someone dies, you may find that your grief surfaces again and again. Often this seems to happen ‘out of the blue’ and it may feel like an unwelcome intrusion. You may have been enjoying yourself one moment and then be in tears the next. You may also notice that certain days, holidays or public events are more likely than others to cause your grief to increase or return.

If feelings of grief return or increase – perhaps even years later – you may feel surprised or concerned. It may help to know that the experience of heightened feelings at particular times is a common and normal aspect of the grieving process.

It is also possible that your grief will seem strangely missing on one or more of these occasions. You may wonder why you are not feeling something and become concerned that this is not normal. At these times, the absence of your grief may leave you feeling guilty, confused or distressed.

If your feelings on a special day are not what you (or other people) expect, do not be alarmed. Grief has a timing of its own, sometimes appearing – or disappearing – when we least expect it. This ebb and flow of feelings is very natural and is a sign of healthy coping.

Some of these ‘special’ days are personal or family events, such as birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, reunions or funerals. Other special days may include public holidays or celebrations, such as Christmas, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day or Valentine’s Day. In addition, there may be other public events, such as a celebrity’s funeral or a tragic accident, that tap into your own grief.

#### **Here are some of the feelings you may notice on special days:**

- Confusion
- Sadness
- Longing
- Irritability
- Worry
- Frustration

#### **For a period of time you may also experience:**

- Loss of appetite
- Difficulty sleeping
- Upset stomach
- Repeating thoughts or memories
- Frequent sighing or need to catch your breath
- Disinterest in usual activities

When we are grieving, it is natural to deeply feel the absence of the person who has died. At special times during the year, this felt absence is often intensified. Remember there is no “right” or “wrong” when it comes to mourning – there is only what works for you, and figuring this out takes practice.

## Personal and Family Events

Weddings, funerals, christenings

Religious and cultural holidays

Reunions, graduations

Birthdays, wedding anniversaries

Other anniversaries

You may find yourself especially bereft or lonely on special occasions when the person who died would have accompanied you. You may feel at a loss when considering invitations to other people's celebrations or get-togethers. Whether or not you choose to attend, consider reaching out to a supportive friend or family member who will respect your choices and be there for you.

There may be special days when you most keenly miss the person who has died because he or she was the only other person who shared or celebrated an event with you (such as a first date or a shared trip). The anniversary of the person's death is also likely to be a significant day for you. Although these days can be trying, you may find them easier if you make plans ahead of time. How might you spend the day? Are there people you would like to ask to spend time with you? Is there a particular place you'd like to be – or avoid?

Symbolic gestures allow us to acknowledge how loved ones remain a part of our lives even in their absence. They can enrich our celebrations with those who live and survive with us.

### **Tips for Coping with Personal and Family Events**

- Make plans that can be changed.
- Tell friends and family what you need, and ask for their support.
- Include the person in your thoughts, prayers or meditation
- Celebrate a special day by taking time to do something in memory of the person who died.
- Remind yourself that it is okay to laugh as well as cry.
- Look for ways to honour the person who died. Light a special candle; make a memorial planting in a garden; create a memorial space or scrapbook with photos and mementos; sponsor a memorial award or scholarship; make a donation to a meaningful charity.

## Public Holidays and Celebrations

- Easter, Thanksgiving, Halloween
- Mother's Day, Father's Day, Valentine's Day
- Christmas and the winter holiday season

Whether you are in the midst of celebrating your own traditions with family and friends or surrounded by the festivities of others, your grief may be reappear as you are reminded of the person and how deeply the loss of that relationship has impacted you. This may be true for you even if the relationship was difficult or troublesome.

If ever there was a time to treat yourself like a cherished friend, this is it. You may need to lower your own expectations as well as talk to others about what you need. If you cry, let that be okay. Allow yourself to experience any sadness that may come. Make room for your feelings, whatever they may be.

### **Tips for Coping with Special Days and Holidays**

- Ask friends and family to support you in making plans that you can change according to your needs. You may need to accept or decline invitations on a 'last minute' basis.
- Continue traditions that you enjoy and leave out those that you don't.
- If you have a faith community, use rituals that support you in your grief.
- Give yourself (or someone else) flowers or another treat.
- Talk with other bereaved people, or with friends and family members who've experienced losses to find out how they get through these special days and holidays.

## **Christmas and the Winter Holiday Season**

For many people December is the most difficult time of the year. Memories of past celebrations with family members or friends who are no longer here can magnify feelings of loss, and you may want to avoid reminders of celebration and togetherness. As the holidays approach, it can be helpful to share your concerns, feelings and apprehensions with someone. Let people know what is difficult for you, and accept offers of help.

### **Tips for Coping with the Holiday Season**

- Think about how you will respond to others when they offer holiday good wishes. You can simply say "Thank you" or "Best wishes to you".
- Consider cutting back on your holiday traditions by not sending cards, or by enlisting the help of other people with meals and decorating.
- If you find Christmas shopping upsetting, it may help to shop early, to shop by telephone, the Internet or catalogue, or to take along an understanding friend. Family may be willing to shop for you if they realize how difficult this is for you. You may also decide to go "shopless" this year and make a charitable donation in the name of the person who has died.
- Consider alternatives such as developing new traditions, going away, eating at restaurants or buying gift cards.
- Create a special decoration and give it a place of honour.
- Remember that you can always do things differently next year.

## The New Year

Whether you are facing the start of a new calendar year or the beginning of your second year of bereavement, the “New Year” may bring unexpected feelings. You might have been looking forward, anticipating the relief, ‘healing’ and improved wellbeing you were going to feel at having made it through the difficult times. Sometimes the New Year does not live up to expectations, and you may find yourself feeling anxious, apprehensive or let down.

Remind yourself that grief does not suddenly disappear. It is a journey with its own timeline. It takes time and energy, and it can be hard to see just where you are at times. You may wonder if you are getting anywhere at all. Try to let go of any expectations that you or anyone else has, and instead trust in yourself and the process. Let yourself be supported by people who allow you to be who and where you are.

### **Tips for the New Year**

- Review the past year – the ups, downs, accomplishments, challenges and ‘gifts’. Consider new approaches if old ones are not working.
- Do not compare your grief to that of others. Treat yourself with patience and kindness.
- Purchase a gift for yourself that your loved one might have bought for you.
- If you feel that friends and family are now less willing or able to support you, consider joining a bereavement support group.
- Give yourself permission to not be your ‘usual self’ or to take ‘time off’. Allow yourself to do things differently – or not at all. Acknowledge that you are doing the best you can.
- Allow a place in your life for your grief. Amidst the activities and demands of everyday life, plan restorative time alone or with supportive others.

## Grieving Families

Special occasions can be particularly stressful for grieving family members. Although your family members may be grieving the same person’s death, each of you had a unique relationship with the person who died and so your experiences of grief may be quite different. In addition, everyone grieves in their own way and at their own pace. Some people openly share and express grief while others do not.

Differences may also be seen in how people cope with special days and holidays. When coming together for special days and events, it may help to be flexible and work toward compromise. Consider meeting with your family members prior to special days and holidays so that you can prepare and strategize ahead of time. Good communication and patience will help to reduce family tensions.

### **Tips for Talking with Family Members**

- Make room for differences. Talk honestly about needs and wishes.
- Acknowledge difficulties. Discuss how you want to handle the changes to family duties, routines and roles.
- Adjust your expectations. Family members may not be able to support one another as they have in the past.
- Try to find a balance between who and what is missing, and what remains.
- When planning family gatherings, explore whether or how to include memories of the person who has died.



Children and youth may also experience changes in their grief during special days and holidays – but your child may not have difficulty with the same days that you do and may not share your reactions or feelings. Ask about his or her thoughts and feelings. Find out what is most important and remember to include your child when making any plans.

### **Tips for Talking with Children and Youth – Questions to Ask**

- What part of this day/event is most important to you?
- What about this day/event do you think might be hard for you?
- How would you like to remember the person who died on this occasion?
- Is there any part of this day that you don't want to participate in?

Understand that this may be a time of heightened emotions and low energy for you and your family. Aim to be kind and patient with yourself and each other. Remind yourself that these special days will be different now, and that your family is just beginning to learn how to cope with those differences.

### **Caring for Yourself**

Holidays are usually times filled with memories, and you may feel especially tender and vulnerable. Consider making time for yourself and your memories as a part of new holiday traditions. Caring for yourself can be another way of honouring the person who died.

Many times, the more we need to take care of ourselves, the less we do it. You may notice that you have been ignoring your own health or do not care very much about yourself; or you may believe that you do not deserve self-care. If you have a physical problem brought on by stress or an emotional reaction, try to pay attention to it.

Grief at any time is tiring and challenging. When special days and holidays approach, you may need to pay more attention to yourself and ask, "What do I most need now?"

## Tips from Other Bereaved People

- Exercise. Stretch. Breathe deeply.
- Rest. Slow down or stop. Grieving requires a lot of energy.
- Balance time alone and time with others.
- Eat foods and drink fluids that are healthy.
- Trust yourself. Be guided by your own instincts.
- Spend time in nature or take a walk around the block.
- Connect with a new or old friend for lunch, a movie or a walk.
- Simplify daily life and responsibilities whenever and wherever you can.
- See your doctor for a complete physical and be sure to let him or her know that someone important to you has died.
- Be gentle, patient and tolerant with yourself. Take it one step at a time.

Expect your feelings to change, perhaps without much warning. There may be times when you feel sad, angry or frustrated. You may feel loneliness or longing for the person who has died. At other times, you may experience joy and laughter or enjoy yourself for a few moments – and then feel guilty. Remind yourself that this is part of the healing process. Try to make room for your feelings, whatever they may be.

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CS-PIER-0135

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**JANUARY 2024**



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