

Grief

What is Grief?

Grief is a natural response to losing someone or something that's important to you. You may feel a variety of emotions, like sadness or loneliness. And you might experience it for a number of different reasons. Maybe a loved one died, a relationship ended, or you lost your job. Other life changes, like chronic illness or a move to a new home, can also lead to grief. Everyone grieves differently. But if you understand your emotions, take care of yourself, and seek support, you can heal.ⁱ

Grief is a strong, sometimes overwhelming emotion for people, regardless of whether their sadness stems from the loss of a loved one or from a terminal diagnosis they or someone they love have received...feeling numb and removed from daily life, unable to carry on with regular duties while saddled with their sense of loss. Grief is the natural reaction to loss. Grief is both a universal and a personal experience. Individual experiences of grief vary and are influenced by the nature of the loss. Some examples of loss include the death of a loved one, the ending of an important relationship, job loss, loss through theft or the loss of independence through disability.ⁱⁱ

Grief can occur as a result of change, job loss, death or marital breakdown.ⁱⁱⁱ

*If you don't know it's grief,
you haven't dealt with it.*

~Leona Swamp

Symptoms of Grief

Physical symptoms - These are symptoms that have a physiological effect on the grieving individual. They resemble the physical symptoms of depression and include loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping, fatigue and loss of energy, physical pains (which may be psychosomatic), and a suppressed immune system. More acute physical symptoms may be episodes of weeping, wailing, or intense physical agitation.

Cognitive symptoms - Grief can also influence how an individual thinks and perceives their world. For example, the grieving individual might feel a sense of dissociation and distance from reality, linked to feelings of disbelief concerning the loss. They may also experience confusion, poor memory, and lack of focus.

Emotional symptoms - The most typical symptom of grief is negative emotion. The spectrum of possible emotions can be diverse, including depression, guilt, anger, hostility, anxiety, despair, hopelessness, and feelings of isolation. These emotions rarely occur simultaneously and may appear in connected but distinct phases.

Interpersonal symptoms - The effects of grief can spill over into the grieving individual's relationships with others. For example, grief is often accompanied by social withdrawal and feelings of distance or resentment toward relationships that may have been healthy before.

Lifestyle symptoms - Finally, symptoms of grief can also be observed in lifestyle changes, such as failing to perform daily routines and self-care and resigning from activities that the grieving individual previously found stimulating.^{iv}

Upsurges of Grief

The intense feelings of grief can come back, unannounced. Even when the intense mourning is over and the loss of the loved one is fully accepted, many “firsts” may touch off a new round of intense and possibly unexpected grieving: the first holiday, birthday, anniversary, and other family events. The grief response may lessen on these particular anniversary days as years pass, but it may not go away entirely. Many unexpected things can touch off a memory. Grief surfaces, too, at the most unexpected promptings: a sight, sound, or smell that reminds you of your loved one; learning about the death of someone you don’t personally know; songs on the radio, television programs. Emotional responses to unexpected triggers can be distressing. This is a normal part of the grieving process.^v

Stages of Grief

1. Denial: When you first learn of a loss, it’s normal to think, “This isn’t happening.” You may feel shocked or numb. This is a temporary way to deal with the rush of overwhelming emotion. It’s a defense mechanism.
2. Anger: As reality sets in, you’re faced with the pain of your loss. You may feel frustrated and helpless. These feelings later turn into anger. You might direct it toward other people, a higher power, or life in general. To be angry with a loved one who died and left you alone is natural, too.
3. Bargaining: During this stage, you dwell on what you could’ve done to prevent the loss. Common thoughts are “If only…” and “What if…” You may also try to strike a deal with a higher power.
4. Depression: Sadness sets in as you begin to understand the loss and its effect on your life. Signs of depression include crying, sleep issues, and a decreased appetite. You may feel overwhelmed, regretful, and lonely.
5. Acceptance: In this final stage of grief, you accept the reality of your loss. It can’t be changed. Although you still feel sad, you’re able to start moving forward with your life.^{vi}

PHYSICAL REACTIONS

Grief and loss affect more than a person’s emotions and state of mind. They can affect the body. Physical reactions to grief can include:

- Fatigue
- Inability to sleep
- Pain
- Stomach pain
- Gastrointestinal upset
- Chest pressure
- Heart palpitations
- Backache
- Panic attack
- Anxiety

Source: [Tools for the Journey Section C \(cancercareontario.ca\)](https://www.cancercareontario.ca/Tools-for-the-Journey/Section-C)

Treating Grief with Medicinal Plants

- ✚ Smudge with sweetgrass or sage
- ✚ Drink pine tea
- ✚ Drink sweet flag tea
- ✚ Take a cedar bath
- ✚ Burn cedar
- ✚ Motherwort tincture^{vii}

Resources

Indigenous Voices Honouring Our Loss and Grief is a video of Individuals from First Nations, Inuit and Metis communities speak about traditional ceremonies after a loved one passes away and the experience of grief. (23.07) The video can be accessed at: [Indigenous Voices: Honouring Our Loss and Grief - Bing video](#)

Teachings to Support Grief and Loss in First Nations, Inuit and Métis Communities, can be accessed at: [Tools for the Journey Section C \(cancercareontario.ca\)](#)

ⁱ [Grief: Physical Symptoms, Effects on Body, Duration of Process \(webmd.com\)](#). Accessed 29 Mar. 2022.

ⁱⁱ [What is grief? - Mayo Clinic](#). Accessed 29 Mar. 2022.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leona Swamp, Executive Director, Aseshate:ka'te Grief Services. Virtual presentation with Angie Barnes, 23 Mar. 2022

^{iv} [What Is Grief? 4 Stages, Models, & Cycles Explained \(positivepsychology.com\)](#). Accessed 29 Mar. 2022.

^v [Tools for the Journey Section C \(cancercareontario.ca\)](#). Accessed 29 Mar. 2022

^{vi} [Grief: Physical Symptoms, Effects on Body, Duration of Process \(webmd.com\)](#). Accessed 29 Mar. 2022.

^{vii} Angie Barnes, Akwesasne. Virtual presentation, 23 Mar. 2022.