

# Grief: Coping with Challenges

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## 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't 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 don't 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't 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’s 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’s 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 health care provider who can talk about this with you.
- If you are troubled by thoughts about what you or others did or didn’t 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’s 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 don't do. Perhaps some people you were counting on haven't been there for you, while other people have unexpectedly come forward to offer their support. It's also possible that you may not want to visit with people while you're grieving, especially if you worry that your true feelings will be a burden to others.

What May Help:

It's 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't 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 don't 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's 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's 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 (e.g., 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't 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 don't 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. (Victoria Hospice Bereavement Services can provide you with a list of the latter.) 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.

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