

# Grief: What Makes It Difficult?

## What's "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 (e.g., 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're 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're grieving a death by murder or suicide, you may have questions that can't 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 don't have closure.
- Sudden, unexpected deaths, such as heart attacks, aneurysms, medical failures or accidents – When you've 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're 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.

If you are grieving a death by suicide, you may also want to read *Grief After Suicide*, another brochure that is available from Victoria Hospice. Visit our website at [www.victoriahospice.org](http://www.victoriahospice.org) or call 250-370-8868.

# 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 isn't 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 doesn't 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 won't 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 (e.g., 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're grieving. You may have strong or confusing feelings related to those experiences.
- Addictive patterns may return or intensify while you're 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's 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 doesn't mean that you should ignore what others say; but it's important to weigh their opinions and advice against what you know about yourself.

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