

# When You're Grieving

## - some helpful info and ideas to help you on the journey

### Grief is normal – even if it doesn't feel like it!

Grief isn't an illness or a condition. It is the normal and natural human response to loss, trauma and change – but it often doesn't feel "normal" when it hits us like a wave and knocks us back...

"It felt like I was going crazy. I could feel a whole heap of different emotions one after the other or all at the same time! I didn't know what would hit me next. Then just as suddenly I could feel completely numb and blank. It was good to find out that I wasn't crazy and that grief was big, unpredictable and full on for lots of people."

Some people find grief so intense they wonder if they ever will feel okay again and if the pain they feel will ever ease. It may be hard to believe in the early days, weeks and months, but yes, the pain does ease bit by bit.

### Grief is a process

Grief is the way we gradually adjust to the reality of what's happened – even if we hate what's happened. It is a process and it takes time. Gradually we adjust to life after our loss and start to build our everyday lives out around what's happened. The emotional and mental pain that can be so intense slowly eases, even though at the beginning we think it never will.

"I realised that as I grieved I was healing from the inside out. I knew it would take a long time, and it did. But my grief wasn't the enemy I first thought it was..."

There are no 'right' or 'wrong' ways to experience grief. There's no secret method that will take grief instantly away. There are no rules. There is no set timetable. And grief isn't a test, a race or a competition. It might be hard to believe, but it does slowly get easier to handle. Take all the time and space you need to grieve in your own way.

### Everyone is different

Your grief experience will be like your fingerprint – unique to you. Don't expect to experience grief exactly like others you know. How it goes for you can depend on all sorts of things, like age, stage in life, your personality, your gender, your culture and beliefs, the amount of support you do or don't have, what losses you have experienced before and the kind of loss you are facing now.

### Grief is strong and powerful

It can creep up on you and knock you off balance when you don't expect it. Grief can shake us up to the core. It can affect every aspect of our lives - emotionally, physically, mentally, spiritually and socially. (*See the list of common grief reactions at the end of this article.*) At times it can be more raw and painful than words can express. And the experience of loss and grief can change how we see the world from then on.

### Grief is like a wave

It can be like being caught up in a beach wave so huge and forceful that you can't figure out which way is up. You're confused, flung around all over the place and forced to catch a breath whenever you can get air. The grief thoughts, feelings and reactions you have can...

- come and go – ebbing and flowing like waves
- can come at you one at a time or can crash on you all at once

- blend into each other
- be brief - last for just minutes - or be intense and seem to last forever
- be hard to put into words
- be unexpected and scary
- be totally numbing and paralysing
- be overwhelming at times and feel out of control
- be delayed and hit you at a later time

## Understanding grief can help

Knowing grief is a process and learning about the sorts of reactions you may experience can encourage you when you feel discouraged or overwhelmed. It can help hearing other people's experiences too, so talking with others who've 'been there' might be worth a try, as long as you remember that everyone's different and your own grief journey is unique to you. There are some helpful books about grief available which you might find useful. Skylight can give you some ideas and a booklist if you contact us on 0800 299 100 or email [rs@skylight-trust.org.nz](mailto:rs@skylight-trust.org.nz)

## Grief is exhausting

Grieving is very hard work. It uses up a huge amount of energy and leaves people very tired and worn out.

"I always used to come home from work each day saying I was exhausted, but now I really know what exhaustion is. I can feel worn out at the end of a day when I've done nothing physically, but mentally and emotionally I've done several grief marathons."

Unfortunately grief isn't a job you can get others to do for you, but, like any task you'd rather avoid, tackling it step by step will be the way you get through it.

## Time itself doesn't heal...it's what you do with the time that passes that counts.

Grief is an active process and as you journey ahead you have the choice to grieve or to bury away your grief to try and avoid the pain. It's understandable but it doesn't work.

## Grief for a significant loss will be part of your life

While the intense and raw pain lessens slowly in time, it never completely goes. It is completely normal to feel some 'after shocks' through your life. All sorts of things can trigger thoughts and emotions again, even a long time after the loss. They can bring painful feelings back in a flash and be even overwhelming for a time. It's like being hurt and bandaged, then bumping that place again. It can really hurt, but over time recovering from those 'bumps' becomes a little easier.

Common grief triggers include:

*a song or piece of music, an event, a smell, a holiday, birthday or anniversary, a date, a taste, a place, an object, a feeling, a sad movie, a photo or another loss that happens.*

## How long will grief take?

As long as it needs to for you. The grief process in us needs a lot longer than most of us realise. We're all so different and, as one person put it. *"My grief had its own agenda. I didn't get to choose how long it took to accept what had happened and to work through all the reactions it caused in me. I wanted it over fast because it so hurt, but after some months I saw there were indicators that I was getting there – but so very slowly."*

There's been a popular view that grief unfolds in 5 certain stages, but it is now widely recognised that this idea is too constricting. While there are general phases during grief that many do



experience, they definitely don't arrive in any prescribed order, and they are not essential requirements for grief to happen. Everyone is different. Always remember grief has no rules, no set timetable, and it's not a race or a competition.

### **Trying to avoid grief by ignoring or denying it**

Avoiding grief might seem a good idea at the time, but it doesn't make it go away. If we push it down it comes out later in other ways, which may be very difficult and intense to deal with, such as health problems, relationship conflicts or depression. Grief is hard, but it's healthy. When a loss first happens you can feel numb, like you just cannot connect with what's happened. This delay is a natural part of adjusting to things, especially if it's been a shock, but then the role of the grief that follows is to help you come to terms with what's happened. If you actively try to ignore your grief, or it seems delayed for a long period of time, you may not realise the effects it can have on your life. Your grief is still there inside and building up - in unhelpful ways. Doctors, counsellors, researchers and people who've 'been there' recognise that buried grief will find its way out somehow, perhaps even much later on in your life. Some of the ways buried grief can affect people include: *becoming physically ill, depression, intense anger and even aggression and violence, suicidal thoughts, poor or strained relationships with others, high levels of anxiety and fear, panic attacks, low self esteem and seeking escape in addictions like alcohol, drugs, sex, food etc, or by working long hours, or in risk taking.* Once the grief has been experienced these symptoms can stop being a problem.

### **Talking to someone you trust can help**

The old saying "A problem shared is a problem halved" holds a real truth. People say that telling someone they trust what's going on inside them is like a big release. It's like taking the top off a bottle of fizzy drink that someone's been shaking! Talking to someone *can help you to:*

- feel supported - you feel less alone and realise others care and want to help
- feel heaps better – it can be a relief
- sort out how you're thinking or feeling
- put things into perspective
- discover ideas or options you hadn't thought about
- know there's someone to talk to when you need to
- find more help and support, if you need it

### **Letting it out – Getting it out**

Expressing what's inside can release a lot of tension and distress that's been inside.

Finding a way to begin letting even a small amount of what's inside out, can help. Some of us find expressing ourselves easy – others find it really hard. The key is to find ways that suit you and then use them.

### **Using WORDS...**

talk to someone, email, phone, text, blog, write a letter, build a website  
keep a journal or a diary, write a story, a poem, a play, a song  
talk about memories with some others who remember too  
go into a field or up a hill and scream and shout it all out

### **Using CREATIVITY...**

sing, make music, drum, dance	draw, paint, sculpt
plant a tree, garden	film, take photos
create jewellery	sew or craft
make a memory book or collect items for a memory box	



## Getting PHYSICAL

walk, run, ride, swim, dance, climb, tramp, cycle  
kick a ball - throw a ball – chuck a Frisbee  
hit a pillow or kick empty boxes

play a sport  
go to a gym  
breathe deeply - stretch

## Getting extra support

The grief process can be difficult, feel lonely and long for many, and also be complicated by other life issues going on as well. Many people find it helpful to seek out the support of a trained counsellor to help them work through their grief. If you have faced a very traumatic loss it can be a good idea to find a counsellor or psychologist to help you find strategies to cope with the unique after-effects a trauma may cause. Your doctor or community directory will list counsellors and psychologists in your area. Look for one that will suit you.

## Self Care is ESSENTIAL

Look after yourself as well as you can. Don't compromise on this. Make sure your daily routine includes regular and nutritious meals and snacks, lots of water to drink, rest and sleep and exercise – even if it's a brief walk outside to the letterbox and back at first. Consider massage, as many find it deeply relaxing. Avoid using alcohol or drugs or other risks to ease your grief – they can easily become another problem to have to sort out. Keep in touch with friends and family and ask for help that you might need with things. (See also Skylight's TAKE TIME TO... info sheet for helpful self care ideas.)

## Negative Thoughts and Feelings

Everyone has negative thoughts and feelings that come and go at different times, and during grief this can especially happen. When they don't lift, or if they leave you with little energy, easily agitated and upset, this may be a warning sign that you may be becoming depressed. Depression means that things have got out of balance. Ignoring how you're feeling won't be able to make the issues go away. Pay attention to what's happening so a more serious depression can be avoided. Exercise, a healthy diet, good support from family and friends, along with seeing your doctor or and/or a counsellor are all helpful steps to take. If you find suicidal thoughts are increasingly in your thoughts, see a doctor, counsellor or mental health worker as soon as you can for support to work through this and to get your life back into better balance again. In an emergency contact your local medical centre, hospital emergency department, mental health service or phone 111.

## Can life really move on?

We all need to know that grieving for difficult losses and changes is valid and completely acceptable – whoever we are. As one person put it, *Even though it hurts, it helps to grieve.*

A useful way to think about the grief process is using the acronym TEAR. Grief helps us...

T = To face and accept the reality of the change and loss,

E = Experience and work through the emotional hurt this brings,

A = Adjust to life being different, without things being as we wanted them to be, and to

R = Reinvest in the new situation and find ways to live well in it.

Adjusting doesn't mean we've finished grieving and that's that. While we might accept our situation, and move forward to build positive, good lives, our loss may still bring us sadness at times. This is normal and understandable. It may be something we see or hear, or something we think about at milestone events. At these times, moments of grief might appear from nowhere obvious at all. But that's okay. It's normal... and all the while, your life can keep growing.



## COMMON GRIEF REACTIONS

The way you personally experience grief will be different from others, but research shows us there are a lot of common sorts of reactions and experiences people go through during grief. Here are some of them below. The intensity of thoughts and feelings will vary for different people and at different times. Many people say grief taught them a lot about themselves – and about life.

“My grief journey was basically a journey inside myself. I grew up a lot and gained a lot of insights, which I didn’t expect because it wasn’t a journey I had signed up for or wanted to go on!”

“I started to pay attention to what was going on for me and to just go with what came at me. It was a roller coaster ride but I figured I just had to hang on and I would come through it all. And that’s what happened. I did get through okay.”

### How It Can Feel... *emotional responses*

numb - shock – stunned  
disoriented – bewildered – confused  
uncertain  
anger – rage  
guilty  
sad – sorrowful  
helplessness – powerlessness  
feeling strange – awkward  
relieved – gratitude  
ashamed – embarrassed  
not caring  
strong - invincible

disbelief  
fearful – anxious – worried  
tense  
unfair – unjust  
regretful  
despair - hopelessness  
feeling vulnerable  
lonely – isolated  
let down – betrayed  
empty  
agitated - buzzy

### How Your Body Can React... *physical responses*

tiredness – exhaustion – fatigue  
crying – moaning – sobbing  
tight chest - shallow breathing – deep sighs  
heart pounding  
aching limbs - tense muscles  
nervous laughter  
feeling immensely strong and energised  
wanting just to sit or lie down - little energy  
having falls or small accidents – clumsiness  
reacting slowly to questions, instructions or situations  
getting illness or infections more easily – like colds  
increased sensitivity to sounds and sights  
a sense of relief and less tension – e.g. after a death you may have been expecting for a long time.

feeling weak – lack of strength  
tears and tearfulness  
shouting – yelling - screaming  
headaches - migraines  
stomach aches – nausea -  
sleeping a lot or unable to sleep  
dehydration  
digestion problems  
agitation – hard to sit still  
changed eating patterns  
bedwetting  
difficulty in swallowing

### What’s Happening In Your Head... *thinking responses*

why me? why not someone else?  
hard to concentrate – hard to remember things  
hard to think of anything else but your loss  
blaming yourself  
not believing the loss has happened



imagining it hasn't happened  
hard to make decisions, even very small ones  
forgetting the loss has happened  
finding what's important to you has now changed  
feeling bad about yourself  
having negative dreams/nightmares  
worrying/being fearful about the future – hard to imagine what a positive future will be like  
thinking who might die next  
thinking your experience is different from others  
wanting to keep busy, so you don't have to think about it  
very dark, negative thoughts  
feeling it's all too hard - possibly even suicidal thoughts, that you need to tell someone about as soon as possible

### **Relating To Other People...** *social responses*

wanting to talk about your loss and what happened a lot – or not at all  
getting confused about details, like the day, date, time etc  
finding yourself actively looking out for the person/thing you have lost  
being preoccupied and forgetful about things  
being very sensitive to what others are thinking or saying about you  
wanting to be with your friends and/or family a lot  
withdrawing from everyone and from social times/events – wanting to be alone  
wanting to be near to people – wanting to always know where they are  
wanting to have hugs – or wanting not to  
wanting to be physically close to someone special  
feeling aggressive – being aggressive  
being angry at others – getting into arguments or fights  
working really hard at something  
giving up on things that have mattered before  
not doing so well at school

### **Why?...** *spiritual responses*

feeling connected to who or what has been lost  
questions about Why? and about life and your place in it  
questioning your religious beliefs/background, or developing new beliefs  
feeling very supported and strengthened by your own faith or spiritual beliefs  
feeling very spiritually alive – or spiritually numb  
wanting to pray – even if you haven't ever before  
feeling let down or punished by your God  
feeling blame and needing to confess it - having a need to be forgiven  
feeling guilt and so a need to be punished  
feeling very negative or very positive  
seeing someone who has died or feeling/sensing their presence

Your loss will always be a part of your life in some way. Your grief will be triggered again every now and then, and it may feel like it's one step forward and two back at times. But remember, your grief healing process isn't about 'fixing it' or making your grief disappear. Your grief process is about assisting you to adjust to all the changes in your life by helping you come to terms with it physically, mentally, spiritually, socially and of course emotionally. Gradually, bit by bit, you can build your life out around your loss, in healthy and positive ways. And what you have learned can help you as you move ahead, and may even help others facing loss that you meet along the way.

**Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.**

*Helen Keller*

