



WHY IS
GRIEF
DIFFICULT?



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No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. -C.S. Lewis



WHY IS GRIEF SO DIFFICULT?

We all experience grief after someone in our life has died. However, even though we know that we can expect feelings of sadness and loss, the grieving process itself can feel very complicated.

You may feel overwhelmed or unable to cope. Often people describe feeling “stuck” in their grief, frustrated with how long the process is taking and wondering if it will ever end. You may feel that your world has changed so much that you no longer know who you are. All of these feelings can happen soon after a death or they may appear later, down the road.

Your feelings can be intensified, and the grieving process can be made more difficult, by some of the many particular challenges that might come with your loss.

- Circumstances or nature of the death
- Lack of support from those close to you
- Competing demands and responsibilities
- Multiple losses
- History of depression, anxiety, trauma, abuse or addiction
- An intense relationship with the person who died
- Getting stuck in your grief

This booklet outlines some of the difficulties that you may encounter in grieving, and offers practical tips and strategies for dealing with the challenges grief can bring.

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.

Accidental deaths, such as motor vehicle accidents, drowning, or plane crashes

These sudden, unexpected events often leave a grieving person with upsetting images and unanswered questions. If a formal investigation is needed, the information about the circumstances of the death can be slow in coming, leaving you confused and with no understanding of what happened.

Untimely and premature deaths, such as the death of a child

Most parents expect their children to outlive them. The death of a child upsets a sense of natural order, which can shake your trust in life and lead you to question your beliefs. These kinds of deaths can be made even more difficult if each parent grieves so differently that the connection between them is threatened.

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 find you are missing the full picture of your loss. Holding on to false hope may make it difficult to get closure. When this happens, you may experience chronic sorrow that may not lessen over time.

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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 intense feelings of longing, regret, guilt or anger. You may look for something or someone to blame, including yourself.

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't be fully answered, or you may have answers in your head that make no sense to your heart. You may ask, "Why?" and wonder if there is something more you could have done. You may suffer guilt that you didn't see the death coming or, in the case of suicide, that your love was not enough to keep the person you have lost alive.

This may help:

- Understand that it may take more time to accept this reality.
- When you feel ready, 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.

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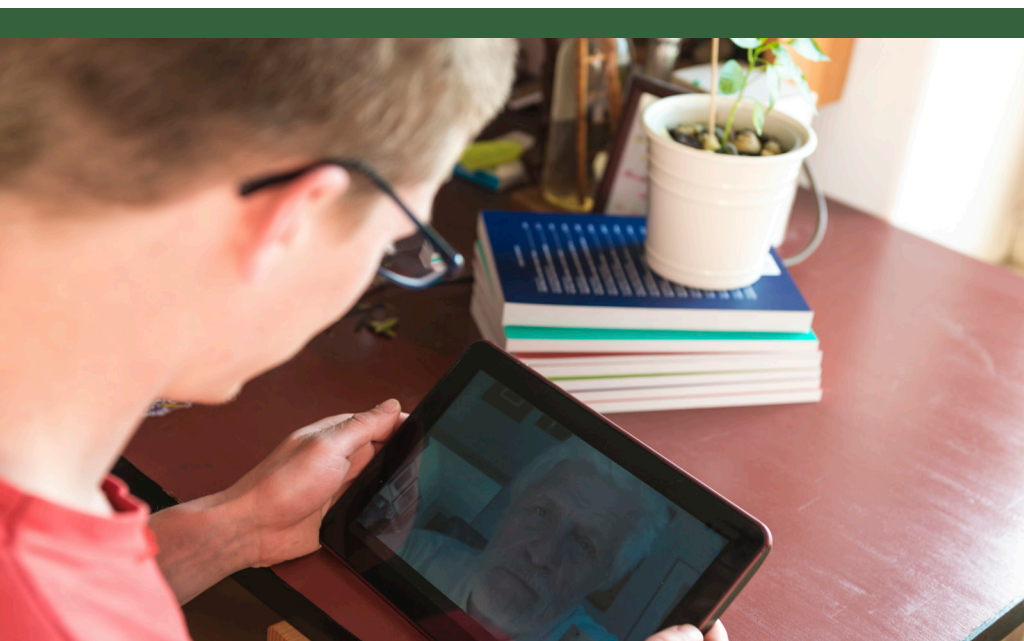
LACK OF SUPPORT OR UNDERSTANDING BY THOSE AROUND YOU

No matter how the death happened, most grieving people find that they need emotional and practical support from people close to them in their family and social circles. Regrettably, however, you may find this support isn't always there for you, and may be confused by what you perceive as a lack of understanding or empathy. It may be helpful for you to understand some of the reasons this might happen.

- Our culture tends to be fast-paced, relying on quick fixes to solve problems. If your grief lasts longer than other people think it should, you may begin to feel inadequate, left behind, and alone.



- You may find that people who have no personal experience with losing a loved one, or those who are uncomfortable with grief, may be unsure or unaware of how to help you.
- You may be geographically separated from close family and friends. These are the people who would normally offer practical and emotional support, and the ones you would find it easiest to ask for help if they lived closer.
- If your usual support people are also grieving, they may not be emotionally able or available 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 particular needs.
- If your relationship with the person who died was secret or disapproved of by friends and family, you may feel that you are not entitled or allowed to grieve. You may feel that you can't reach out to others and that you have to carry your grief alone. This is sometimes called "disenfranchised grief."



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This may help:

- Remind yourself that grieving is a normal process and not something to be hurried or fixed. No one else can set a timeline for your grief.
- Remember that what others say about grief and loss may be true for them, but that doesn't necessarily make it right for you.
- If geography separates you from family and friends, try setting up specific times to talk on the phone or Skype with them. You can also reach out and share your thoughts in an e-mail or hand-written letter.
- Be mindful of those close to you who are grieving this same death. If they aren't able to give you the support you need, find other people who can.
- If you are feeling alone in your grief, reach out to trusted friends, family, those who have had similar experiences, chaplains, church communities, support groups, bereavement volunteers, grief counselors, or therapists.

COMPETING DEMANDS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

One thing is sure and certain: life goes on in spite of grief. However, grieving can take a tremendous amount of energy and focus that might otherwise be directed towards your everyday obligations, duties, or responsibilities. You may feel you need to delay your grieving because of those demands. For example:

- You may feel pressured to return to work or school before you are ready.

- You may have ongoing caregiving responsibilities – children or aging parents.
- You may have additional duties as a result of the death, such as running a business, selling property, or settling an estate.
- If you have lost a spouse, you may feel you need to take on the responsibilities formerly assumed by that person.

This may help:

- Recognize that this is a critical time when you need to do some rebalancing.
- Remind yourself that while some tasks may need to be completed immediately, others can definitely wait. Set priorities and try to pace yourself.
- If you work outside the home, arrange to take a leave of absence. If this isn't possible, consider other ways to reduce your stress and workload.
 - Are there work tasks that could be delegated to a co-worker temporarily?
 - Could you lighten your load at home?
 - Are there chores that you could give up for a period of time?
 - Can friends or family take over some of your home responsibilities – for example, cooking, cleaning, or maintaining your property – for a while?
- Give some honest thought as to which caregiving responsibilities you absolutely must do and which you could let go for now. Ask someone else to take on or help you with these tasks for a short time.
- If you have had to take on new and unfamiliar household responsibilities, such as cooking meals or maintaining

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your property, consider hiring someone to help out. If that isn't possible or practical, ask someone to teach you what you need to know.

- Depending on your unique circumstances, you may need to put parts of your grief on hold while you complete a task or meet a particular obligation. If this happens, make sure there is time for your grief later.
- If you are constantly delaying your grieving because of major caregiving responsibilities such as raising children or caring for an elderly parent, it's important to make time for yourself and to process your grief. Try to ensure that your grief does not get neglected or buried.



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 than you expected. You may feel numb or overwhelmed by emotions that link one loss to another. Some of the other losses that may now be affecting you in this way 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.



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- 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? When did they happen? 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.
- Make a conscious effort to reach out to your support network.
- If your social network is inadequate and you are feeling overwhelmed, consider seeking help from a grief counselor or therapist.

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 recognize and separate your grief from, for example, a return to depression.

- Some people experience a degree of depression 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.
- If the person who has died was abusive toward you, your feelings as you grieve may change unpredictably; for example, you may feel anger one moment and intense sadness the next.
- 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.

This may help:

- Many people manage depression and anxiety through self-talk, meditation, physical activity, or relaxation exercises. However, if you find that your day-to-day 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 be helpful.
- You may need professional assistance to sort out how old losses from past trauma or abuse may be affecting you in the present. Be gentle with yourself and give yourself time to work through your thoughts and feelings.
- Remind yourself of all that you have learned about your addiction, and remember 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.

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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 an especially close or especially troubled relationship with the person who died, you may experience particular 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; for example, you may be relieved that the person is dead or surprised 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.

This 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 can 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.



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- Exploring your spirituality can be helpful at this time, as it can help to place an intense relationship in perspective.

GETTING STUCK

At some point, many grieving people feel that they are stuck or trapped in the grief process. To you and others in your life, it may seem that nothing is changing significantly or quickly enough. You may be confused or disappointed that you are not “better.”

Even though getting stuck 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 being stuck in your grief, you may want to talk with a counselor.

This may help:

- Be patient and remain open to change. It might 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 release 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.



Many different bereavement services and supports are offered throughout the region. These include counselling; a variety of bereavement support groups, such as drop-in and walking groups; education; and referrals to other local resources and services.

For more information, contact the Champlain Hospice Palliative Care Program at 613-683-3779 or visit our website at www.champlainpalliative.ca.

You can also visit the Champlain Health Services directory at <http://www.champlainhealthline.ca/>

Content courtesy of Victoria Hospice Society

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Sometimes your heart needs more time to accept
what your mind already knows.



