



## **Loss and Grief**

Information and resources

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## **Ten Things to Know about Grief**

When you are grieving, it helps to know what to expect. Although your grief is unique to your relationship with the loved one who died, there are some common themes that many people experience.

### **1. Death can affect all aspects of your life**

Grief is a life-transforming event. It can feel like your world has been shattered. The grief process is the journey between how things were and how they will be.

### **2. Grief is a natural process**

The grief you feel is the consequence of living, loving and your meaningful connections with others. Grief is a normal part of life and a natural response to loss.

### **3. Individuals differ in their grieving styles**

How you grieve is the unique result of your personality, your past history of loss, and the relationship that you had with the loved who died. Each person will grieve in their own way and with their own timetable. To cope with their grief, some people will openly express the emotions that they experience while others will control their thoughts and emotions. Neither of these styles is right or wrong; each can be an effective way through grief.

### **4. Children and grief**

Children look to the important adults in their lives to learn how to grieve. They are sensitive to the moods and behaviour of the adults around them and will not talk about their thoughts and feelings of loss unless the adults do. Children are frightened by what they do not know or understand. Simple, honest information about death and grief is helpful to them.

## **5. Social connections and support**

When we grieve we want and need support from others. Some people may not be able to provide the understanding and caring that we expect from them. Because all of the relationships in our lives will be altered in some way after a major loss, it is normal to look at, change or sometimes end, certain relationships. Often the company of other bereaved people is particularly comforting.

## **6. Experiences you might have in grief**

When you are grieving, you can feel very different from your usual self. You may feel intense pain and emotions that you have never felt before. You are not going crazy; this is a natural part of grief. Responses such as fatigue, forgetfulness and irritability result from your attention and energy being directed toward your grief and adjustment to loss.

## **7. Fluctuations in the grief process**

As you journey along the path of grief, you will find that your feelings and responses vary at different times. There will be unpredictable ups and downs, good days and bad days. It is important to understand and value the good days as breaks or rests in your journey.

## **8. Self-care and what helps**

There are things you can do to help yourself at this challenging time. Getting information about grief will help you to understand your responses and your journey. Be gentle and patient with yourself. Do what you can to keep some normal routine for health and social contact. Support may come from a variety of sources; family, friends, bereavement groups, or chat rooms. If you are concerned about yourself, seek professional counseling.

## **9. The time it takes to grieve**

Despite what you may hear about 'getting over it' or 'the first year', there are no time lines for grief. It takes as long as it takes which is often longer than you or other people expect. You may feel pressure to be better than you are by now, whenever this is. It is certain that this loss will continue to be part of your life and that you will always have times when you think about, miss, and grieve for the loved one who died.

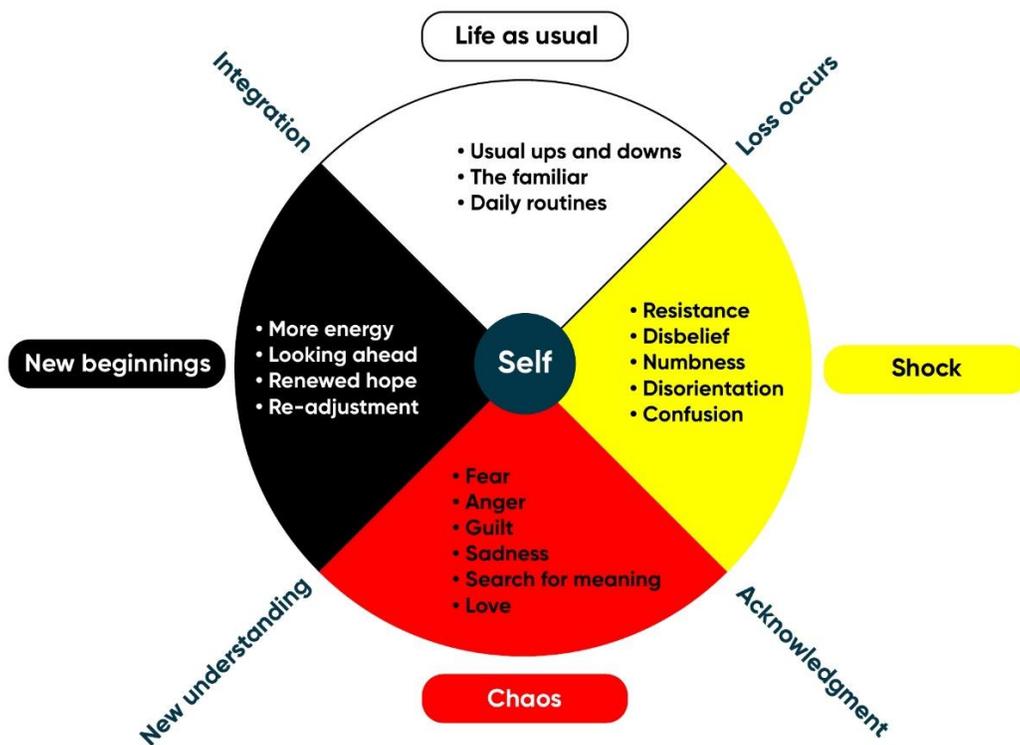
## **10. Grief as a spiritual journey of healing**

The death of someone significant brings change that puts you on a different life path. Nothing will ever be the same, yet you must somehow go on and find meaning in the new path before you. As the journey continues, you will experience healing and personal growth as a result of the suffering you have endured and the lessons that you have learned about what you truly value.

## The Grieving Wheel – A Model of the Grieving Process

Hospice Yukon developed a model of the grieving process we call the Grieving Wheel, which is based on the circular design of a First Nations' Medicine Wheel.

### The Grieving Wheel



For more information and resources, please visit [www.hospiceyukon.net](http://www.hospiceyukon.net)



Each grieving experience is completely unique and yet there are ways we all grieve the same. The Grieving Wheel helps us reflect upon these normal responses to loss as recurring cycles in our lives. Beginning at the top with LIFE AS USUAL, we move around the wheel, often swinging back and forth between the four phases. Life as usual is a time when the daily routines are familiar, with the usual ups and downs. Then loss occurs and a new journey begins.

At first, we find ourselves in a state of SHOCK, sometimes unable to believe or comprehend what has happened. We hold everything at arms length for a while, denying that it could be true. We feel numb and disoriented. We long for a return to Life as Usual, but in spite of our resistance to what has happened, we eventually come to acknowledge our loss. Shock can last a very short time or can become prolonged if in our resistance to painful emotions we stay in the state of numbness.

As we let go of our resistance, we experience some or all of the intense and painful emotions that we associate with grief: sadness, fear, anger, guilt, despair, loneliness, depression and hopelessness. When the emotions are overwhelming it feels like CHAOS. Our old, familiar world has collapsed.

This is a difficult but very important part of our journey around the wheel. Understanding the grieving process can help us here. Knowing that this intense suffering *will* end and will lead us towards our healing, we can find the courage to stay present and open to all the feelings that arise.

Through the experience of the pain and suffering we begin to see the world differently. Everything has changed since the loss. We are not the same person we used to be. Our perspective has changed, and we find ourselves searching for the meaning in it all. As we begin adjusting to life without our loved one, we come to a new way of thinking about life; a new understanding.

The focus of our journey now turns to NEW BEGINNINGS. Slowly we are finding more and more energy available to us, energy that was previously going into coping with the Chaos of our feelings. With this energy we begin the job of

putting our life back together. We practice being “the new me” and start the process of re-entering society, of finding our place in the world again.

The process of integration can be gradual as we slowly come back into a state of balance within ourselves. Slowly, there is a growing sense of comfort and familiarity with our new circumstances and who we are.

We have now come full circle and we are back in Life as Usual. Although when we look around we realize that this is a very different place from where we began our journey. We have undergone a personal transformation and *this* is now our new “normal.” Our journey around the wheel has not just been circular; it has actually been a spiral of growth bringing us to a new place in our life.

### **Experiences of Grief**

There are a wide variety of responses associated with the experience of a major personal loss such as death. The following list gives some commonly experienced feelings, behaviour and physical sensations that are normal responses to loss. Much allowance must be given for individual expressions of grief within this broad range of normal responses, and not all responses may be experienced by one person.

#### **Feelings:**

- Sadness- may or may not be expressed by crying.
- Anger- resulting often from frustration that there is nothing that could be done to prevent the death, and at the deceased for leaving. If this is not expressed, it may turn inward against the grief.
- Guilt-about what happened or did not happen
- Anxiety- feeling unsure about how to carry on living and heightened awareness of ones' own mortality
- Loneliness

- Edginess and irritability
- Fear- of dying oneself or contracting the illness
- Fatigue- expressed as apathy or listlessness
- Shock
- Yearning
- Relief- particularly after a painful, lengthy illness ends
- Numbness

### **Thoughts:**

- Disbelief
- Confusion; inability to concentrate or make decisions
- Sense of presence of the deceased
- Preoccupation with thoughts about the deceased
- Visions of deceased, hearing a voice
- Inability to make decisions

### **Physical Symptoms:**

- Hollowness in the stomach, nausea
- Tightness in the chest
- Oversensitivity to noise
- Sense of unreality

- Sexual disturbances- impotence, menstrual changes
- Irregular heartbeat
- Breathlessness
- Weakness in the muscles
- Dryness in the mouth
- Lack of energy
- Digestive upsets, constipation, diarrhea

### **Behaviours:**

- Crying sometimes uncontrollably for long periods
- Sleep disturbance, inability to sleep or early morning awakenings
- Appetite disturbances-undereating or overeating
- Absentmindedness, inability to concentrate
- Social withdrawal from other people, lack of interest in current affairs
- Dreaming of the deceased- both normal dreams and nightmares
- Avoidance of reminders of the deceased person
- Searching, calling out the name of the loved one
- Sighing and pining
- Restless over activity
- Visiting places or carrying objects associated with the deceased
- Treasuring objects belonging to the deceased

## **Understanding Your Emotions**

Emotions are part of the natural process of grief. An emotion is neither good or bad, nor right or wrong, it is just an emotion. Emotions or feelings can be very uncomfortable but they are not harmful. You may not be used to feeling the amount of emotion that your grief has triggered. Take things a little at a time and deal with each emotion as it comes. Let your self be in the experience, be curious about it, attend to what it is like in detail, and allow the feeling to move through you and out. Your emotions can become something you journey with rather than wish to avoid.

### **Sorrow: sadness, emptiness, loneliness, and longing**

Sorrow is your sadness for the loss itself. It may be expressed through weeping, crying, sobbing and wailing. Or you may feel sorrow without any outward expression. The pain of sorrow is heartache. You might say that your heart is broken or that you feel wounded—like being half a person.

Your sorrow is related to the companionship and relationship that you are missing and to the love and connection you felt with the person. You may want the person back, want the relationship to continue, want someone to love and care for who loves you in return. Because you are missing the sharing of daily experiences and the intimate knowing of a close loved one, you may feel like you don't belong anywhere properly.

These aspects of sorrow can build on each other and you may be afraid to start crying in case you never stop.

### ***What helps***

Honour your sadness

This is a natural part of experiencing your loss. Give yourself permission to include grief as part of your life right now. Balance feeling the sadness with doing the things that need doing.

Share your experiences

Find people with whom you can be sad. The company of other bereaved people may be comforting as you can assume that they will have some similar experiences and understanding.

Express your sorrow

It may be helpful to have a regular time and place to allow yourself to be sad and to weep, such as in your morning shower, at the grave side, or sitting on a memorial bench.

Create ways of remembering

Find meaningful yet realistic ways to keep the person who died in your life: talk to him, celebrate her birthday, put up a Christmas stocking, keep his pictures out, talk about her. You will find what feels natural and positive for you.

### ***The other side of sorrow***

In 'The Prophet', Kahlil Gibran says "Your joy is your sorrow unmasked." Once the harder part of sadness is done, there comes a sweetness in which you are able to recall the good times. Memories bring a sense of loving and being loved.

### **Hopelessness, despair, meaninglessness, and void**

This is the central pain of grief. As sadness empties out of you, then hopelessness and despair arise. You may feel there is 'no light at the end of the tunnel.' Perhaps you never thought you would feel this way. If you see no point in going on and it's hard to find a purpose, you wonder how you can go on living in these circumstances. Depression, suicidal thoughts, or a longing to have life be over may plague you now.

Hopelessness and despair can come for fleeting moments or be a significant portion of your grief journey. These feelings are related to depression and you and others might call it that. In grief, your mood is variable and you have a

range of emotions, for example, you have moments when you can laugh. In clinical depression, your mood is consistently low and you are emotionally flat. Your fear may be that it will always be this way, but this is an in-between time - a still place or a transition - in which you integrate what has been with what is now. The stillness or emptiness allows you to move into what is to come.

### ***What helps***

Share your ambivalence

If you are uncertain about how to go on, seek help from your doctor, counsellor or spiritual advisor.

Let others know and help

If you can, spend time with the generations of your family. Identify people who have been through this and survived. These may be people in your own life or characters in books or movies who have inspired you.

Value this time

This is a time of transition and change. Allow yourself to reflect on where you have been and where you might be heading. Imagine that a seed has been planted in the ground; in the dark, it is preparing to grow.

Nurture yourself

Spend quiet time in nature and allow the beauty of the world to touch you. Notice the continuation of life's cycles. You may find it helps to keep a journal or to record your progress in some way. Remember to value your small accomplishments.

### ***The other side of hopelessness***

Recognition of the natural cycles of life can bring you an acceptance of yourself and your process. Being in touch with the beauty of the world can bring peace. May Sarton wrote, "Help us to be the always hopeful gardeners of the spirit who know that without darkness nothing comes to birth as without light nothing flowers."

## **Guilt**

Many grieving people experience some feelings of guilt. To question yourself and your experience is part of being human. You may feel responsible, whether this is rational or not.

You are trying to make meaning of something tragic and painful. Guilt arises from the belief that there must be a reason for everything that happens. When you are unable to find reasons, you might blame yourself as this seems better than having no explanation. Guilt also arises from a vulnerable, self-critical point of view and feelings of helplessness in not being able to change things then or now.

You may have regrets about things done and not done, or said and not said. This can trap you in a downward spiral that feels powerful and real.

You may experience legitimate guilt related to things you really are responsible for. Feelings of guilt are often related to ideas about how things should be or should have been.

### ***What helps***

#### **Examine your guilt**

Look at what you feel guilty about and examine it. Look at what you are guilty of - the real part - and decide what you need to do about this.

#### **Forgive yourself**

Practice self-forgiveness by identifying what you can forgive yourself for and what parts of your guilt you can let go of. There may be parts that you are not ready to let go of yet.

#### **Get a reality check**

Talk to a trusted person for a reality check. This may help you to separate the real from the groundless guilt.

Take action

You may need to do penance for things you judge yourself guilty of. Consider making amends rather than punishing yourself and remember once the price is paid, that's it. Charitable works, positive action, or a change in behavior are positive ways to make amends.

Repeat the above as necessary

It is useful to review your guilt, sorting and letting go as you are ready.

### ***The other side of guilt***

Honour your guilt as a teacher of what you believe is right and wrong. In searching for meaning in the midst of your grief, you learn what you want to hold onto and value. You find that you grow through this experience.

### **Anger**

Anger is a natural reaction to frustration, powerlessness, or injustice. Angry feelings are a natural and healthy response to loss. However, anger is a difficult emotion to accept as it can be powerful and menacing, for you and for others. Socially acceptable ways to express anger are hard to find as it is not 'nice' to be angry. You may have other words for anger, saying 'I'm upset, frustrated, annoyed, cross, or disappointed.'

Your anger may be justifiable anger. It may have a target. There may be valid reasons for your anger. Your anger may be self-directed and related to your feelings of guilt.

You may experience anger without a target or you may not want to acknowledge the target of your anger if, for example, you are angry at the person who died. This can cause free-floating anger that comes from an internal pressure of intense feelings.

Sometimes you may use anger as a distraction or protection from feelings that you fear may overwhelm you. This is not wrong - it's just a way to have control. Anger may mask a deep emotion, hurt or injury that you are not prepared to address.

### ***What helps***

Be safe.

Take care of yourself and protect others, so that your anger does not become harmful. Learn and practice anger management. Take time out when you feel that you might lose control. Time out means walking away, literally, from whatever the situation is. Immediately. Say when you will return. You may only need a short time to calm yourself.

Defuse your anger.

Let the steam off. Physical activity that includes big muscle movement helps. Sports, running, or aerobics are a beneficial release. Repetitive actions are good: hammering, digging in the garden, cooking or baking that require chopping, kneading, or pounding. Find activities in your daily routine that help defuse your anger.

Express the feelings.

In a safe place, with no judgment, talk out the whole story. Examine the details and name your feelings. Express these feelings through safe outlets. This process may put things back in perspective and help you to decide if there are things you need or want to do.

Take action.

Identify positive steps you can take to redress any wrong you perceive has been done. These might be actual or symbolic actions.

Relieve your tension.

Take care of yourself through relaxation; get a massage or spa treatment. Practice prayer or meditation. Talk to people who care about you and are able to hear about your struggles.

## ***The other side of anger***

Within your anger, there is energy for positive action. It arises from the same source as initiative. Personal change and growth require dynamic energy.

## **Fear and Anxiety**

Fear and anxiety are very powerful physical sensations which can include rapid shallow breathing, nervousness and agitation, upset stomach, and heart palpitations. Usually, fear is telling you to avoid or get away from some danger, but when you are grieving you may get this signal without any real danger present. Your fear may be about the future rather than the present. Fear, anxiety and especially panic are felt in your body.

If you fear being unable to cope, not knowing how to go on, or what life will be like, you may not want to go out or face new things and new people. You may feel panicked or paralyzed. If you have too much to deal with, your fear can become generalized into nameless dread. An accumulation of fear and stress creates chronic anxiety and possibly panic attacks.

You may be afraid of the intensity of your own emotions and wonder if you are going crazy. You worry about loss of control, thinking that if you begin to express emotion you won't be able to stop.

Your fear may centre on certain persistent thoughts or memories related to the illness or death. This can be a dilemma as you avoid these memories yet fear that they may be all you have. As you move through your grief process, you will reclaim all your memories again.

It is quite common to fear illness and dying, for yourself and other family members, due to your heightened sense of mortality and sensitivity to symptoms.

## ***What helps***

Name your fear.

Stop and focus on your fear or anxiety. This is the beginning of being able to manage them. Explore what causes these feelings for you. A helpful saying: "To name it is to tame it." Get information about whatever causes your fear, as knowledge gives you power. If you are suffering from anxiety or panic attacks, ask your doctor for help and advice.

Use problem solving strategies.

Start by asking questions like: "What do I need to do now? What can I tackle later? Who can help and what can they do? What resources do I have?" Think small and organize things into bite size pieces. Review this process to identify what you learned and can use again. As you begin to take some control, you find that your fears begin to lift.

Identify what soothes your anxiety.

Notice what increases and decreases your anxiety. Does it help to be alone or be with others? Use positive self-talk, for example, 'My body is responding to an emergency, and there is NO emergency. I am safe.' Make a list of what to do when you feel panicky: call a designated friend, be active, go for a walk, clean the house, exercise. Hang onto something; a pillow, teddy bear, an article of clothing belonging to the person who died. Do something soothing; a bath, massage, yoga; practice prayer, meditation or visualization.

Breathe slowly, exhale.

Let the sensations of fear or anxiety remind you to breathe, slowly and fully. Take a big breath in and let it out with a sigh.

## ***The other side of fear and anxiety***

You are responding to change and ready for the challenge. There is a similarity between being anxious and being excited - heart rate up, sweating palms, dry mouth, stomach churning. Rather than tell yourself 'I am afraid', say 'I am ready.' Fear is an indicator of being at your edge, where growth can happen.

## Grieving & Mourning

Grief is what you feel on the inside - mourning is expressing your grief & letting it out. Grief may feel like numbness, sadness, anger, guilt, and sometimes relief all rolled up into one. It's a pain in your gut and a hole in your chest. When we mourn we cry, talk about the loss, write about it and find ways to express it. Everybody grieves inside when they lose someone or something they love but only people who mourn really heal and live and love fully again. There are many ways to mourn, different things work for different people. Here is a list that might help you find your way:

write poems & stories

journal

make a memory box or book

paint, draw, sculpt

dance

sing

write a song

light a candle

release balloons

visit the cemetery

cry & laugh

do a fire ceremony

drum

make a memory quilt

collect stories

plant a tree

smudge

remember anniversaries

spread ashes

wear clothes or jewelry of your loved one

pray

## Comfort & Solace

When we are hurting, whether it is physical or emotional, we heal more quickly when we are comforted. Finding ways to feel comfort and take care of ourselves can help with our grieving. Being physical keeps us more balanced - it is great for getting us out of our heads. Nature is also grounding and healing. One man said that nature was the only place that could hold all of his grief. Gratitude is another important part of healing. Each time we feel gratitude, even for small things, it nourishes our wellbeing. The list below offers more things to do. Many things that help us to mourn also bring us comfort and solace so the two lists overlap:

walk in nature

find gratitude in small things

take baths

watch the sunrise

spend time by water

get lots of hugs

sleep

read

eat well

be with supportive people

cook

clean

run, bike, swim, hike

do yoga

meditate

walk a dog, pet a cat

do a sweat lodge or sauna

carve or do other crafts

watch the sunset



*Compassionate end-of-life and grief support for Yukoners*

Hospice Yukon offers support for individuals and families facing death and grief. Our services include counselling (in person, by telephone, or online), Healing Touch, a variety of grief groups, educational workshops, and a lending library. Please contact us for information about current offerings.

**Hospice Yukon is open**

**Monday to Friday**

**11:30am - 3:00pm**

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