

# UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

Grief is the normal, healthy response to any kind of difficult change or loss, but it can feel far from normal sometimes. Many people find grief can be intense and tough going for a while. It's usually an unpredictable, up and down experience. The bigger the loss, the greater the grief.

Many hard life situations can cause us grief, such as the serious illness, injury, or death of someone loved, or of a treasured pet; a relationship break down; changes in health or wellbeing; changes in your way of life, such as moving house, changing jobs, job loss, financial difficulties, or adjusting to retirement; loss of a long-held dream or goal; losing treasured things or experiencing property damage after a crime or natural disaster; or losing your sense of safety and self-confidence after a traumatic, frightening event.



## Grief is a Process

Its purpose is to help us to gradually adjust our lives to life after our difficult change or loss. It doesn't have any set pattern, rules, or timetable – and it can't be rushed. It will take the time it needs to take for you.

There's no one 'right' way to grieve. We're all different so we grieve differently. It's a personal, individual experience, and as unique to you as your fingerprint is.

## Grief Affects the Whole Person

It's an instinctive response that involves a mixture of automatic reactions, physical effects, thoughts, and feelings. Its impact on us is often more far-reaching than we expect. The main loss we grieve for often also causes some further changes and losses that we will react to as well. All our grief reactions can be intense for a while, but most people find they slowly ease.



## Common grief reactions include...

**Emotionally** – Shocked, disbelieving, numb, helpless, sad, agitated, anxious, tearful or unable to cry, irritable, angry, blaming, guilty, regretful, overwhelmed, very low. If a loss was anticipated, relief may come when it finally happens.

**Mentally** – Confused, bewildered, hard to focus or concentrate, preoccupied, easily distracted, forgetful, brain fog, mentally exhausted, repeatedly replaying difficult memories, nightmares. Some may have suicidal thoughts.

**Physically** – Shaky, weak, unsteady, a tight chest, hot and cold, nauseous, upset stomach, changes in sleep and appetite patterns, exhaustion, body aching, headaches, restless. Grief lowers immunity so more susceptible to illness. Increased clumsiness, so more accident prone. Existing health conditions may get worse.

**Socially** – Wanting more time alone, or with other people. Wanting to talk about what's happened, or not. Relationships may become more tense, or closer. Wanting to get 'back to normal', or avoiding it.

**Spiritually** – Asking big life questions, such as 'Why?' or 'What will happen to me/us now?' or 'What's life all about?' Some might sense the presence of someone loved who has died. Drawing positively on culture and spiritual beliefs for comfort and support, or questioning them. Seeing the world and your life differently after what's happened.

**You might experience moments of joy or laughter sometimes, which can feel confusing when you're also hurting,**

but it's a normal part of grieving – and of life. It can bring some relief from pain for a while, and that's a good thing.

## Different grief reactions can come and go

There can be times of strong emotion and intensity... then moments of comfort, distraction, or avoidance... then grief can hit hard again. The grief waves might come forcefully, even a long time after your loss, and you can feel knocked off your feet for a bit. All kinds of things can trigger memories and bring waves of emotion and reactions back, such as photos, stories, music, special possessions, smells, places, or particular dates. You'll learn to breathe and do what helps to steady you again.

## Slowly, your life will grow out around what has happened to you

Try to be patient with yourself. Life can become more hopeful, positive, and active again, but the grief won't suddenly disappear. Instead, it'll ease up and stay a natural part of you, because what happened really mattered. The good news is it becomes much more manageable.



## WHAT CAN HELP?



### Be kind to yourself and let yourself grieve

Let your grief take the time it needs. Your grief is your own. It's okay to do it in your way, whatever anyone else says, as long as you keep yourself safe. You're not going crazy – though it can often feel a bit like that for a while. Emotions aren't good or bad – they just are. Even though they can get big and hurt a lot, they're normal after loss. Make time to pause and rest. Grieving is usually exhausting. Avoid making big life decisions in the first few months because your mind is dealing with a lot. You want to be thinking as clearly and objectively as possible when making big choices, and grief can make that harder for a while.



### Look after yourself

Try to eat healthy meals. Drink water through the day. Do some walks, easy exercise, or stretch. Get enough rest and sleep. See your doctor if any grief reactions become concerning. Avoid using alcohol, drugs, or other risky choices to cope with grief, because these can unhelpfully affect your moods, worsen your pain, and complicate things even more for you and others around you.



### Use the support of friends, family, and whānau around you

Grief can be hard but try not to isolate yourself. Keep connecting with others, because this boosts your mental health and wellbeing. If people offer support, accept it if it'll make things a bit easier.



### Draw on your culture or spiritual beliefs if they give you comfort and support

People often find these help them to make meaning of what's happened and give them some extra strength and resilience to cope.



# The Grief Centre

## **Express yourself to help you work through your thoughts and feelings**

You can do this privately or openly – over to you. It can help a lot to get out what's been building up inside. Try talking to someone you trust about your grief or what's playing on your mind. Choose someone close to you, someone you respect, a counsellor, or perhaps a helpline. Some people find praying helps. Try some creative approaches. Maybe write out, draw, or paint your thoughts and feelings. Make, build, or create something meaningful. Create music, sing, dance, or make a music playlist. Yell into the wind. Punch a punching bag or hit a pillow. Expressing yourself can be a big relief. Try a few different ways and see what helps the most.

## **Each day, stop and take some slow, deep, belly breaths**

Don't hurry as you breathe in and out because focusing on your breathing can help you to calm your mind and body. Just concentrate on your breathing for a minute or two, without distractions. Then look around and notice your surroundings, and how you're feeling.

## **If you can, spend some time in nature every day**

Notice the natural things around you. Being near nature can help to calm and relax us – and inspire us.

## **Keep up a simple daily routine if you can – but go slower for a while**

Routines can help us feel a bit more normal, even when things have changed.

## **Have more rest than usual – grieving can be exhausting**

Take more breaks.



## **Grief might make some people around you feel awkward or uncomfortable**

Expect some thoughtless comments or opinions, or that some might say nothing about your loss at all. Spend time with those who do understand and don't judge.

## **Keep special photos or mementoes safely until you're ready to see them**

There's no rush. Memories aren't always easy, even if they're treasured ones.

## **It's normal to experience some extra waves of painful grief on anniversaries and other special days**

Plan ahead so you can use support or choose to do things on those days that might make them a little easier to cope with.

## **Ask for extra support if you need it**

Don't hesitate. You don't have to get through this alone. Perhaps join a grief support group. Some find their grief doesn't ease up, or reactions become worse. If this is you, see your doctor or talk with a counsellor soon.

