

# Dealing With Grief: A Guide to Understanding Your Reactions

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When someone important to you dies, you grieve. This means that you may experience a wide range of responses, often over an extended period of time. The following three sections generally coincide with early, middle and later grief, though variation and overlap of these phases is common.

## When a death occurs

As you accept the fact of the death of someone important, you will feel shock, numbness and disbelief that this has happened. Panic and strong physical and emotional reactions are common.

## Adjusting to loss

Later, as the numbness subsides, you will deal with what this loss means to you and the emotional pain of grieving. The intensity of feeling may surprise or frighten you, but it is natural and can be resolved as you move through it.

## As life goes on

As you adjust to life without the person who died, you will begin to re-establish connections with the world around you. You have more energy for family and friends, work and other interests.

Grief may be somewhat familiar, or it may be a new, uncertain endeavour. It is not an easy

journey and there may be times when you want more support than is available through your social network.

## The Grief Journey

### When a Death Occurs

#### *Walking the Edges*

#### **SOCIAL**

Withdrawal from others  
Unrealistic expectations of self and others  
Poor judgement about relationships

#### **PHYSICAL**

Shortness of breath and palpitations  
Digestive upsets  
Low energy, weakness and restlessness

#### **EMOTIONAL**

Crying, sobbing and wailing  
Indifference and emptiness  
Outrage and helplessness

#### **MENTAL**

Confusion, forgetfulness and poor concentration  
Denial and daydreaming  
Constant thoughts about the person who died and/or the death

#### **SPIRITUAL**

Blaming God or life  
Lack of meaning, direction or hope  
Wanting to die or join the person who died

#### *What helps*

- To pace yourself moment to moment
- To make no unnecessary changes

- To talk about the person and the death
- To use practical and emotional supports

## Adjusting to Loss

### *Entering the Depths*

#### **SOCIAL**

Rushing into new relationships  
Wanting company but unable to ask  
Continued withdrawal and isolation  
Self-consciousness

#### **PHYSICAL**

Changes in appetite and sleep patterns  
Shortness of breath and palpitations  
Digestive upsets

#### **EMOTIONAL**

Intense and conflicting emotions  
Magnified fear for self or others  
Anger, sadness, guilt, depression

#### **MENTAL**

Sense of going crazy  
Memory problems  
Difficult to concentrate/understand  
Vivid dreams or nightmares

#### **SPIRITUAL**

Trying to contact the person who died  
Sensing the presence of the person who died; visitations  
Continued lack of meaning

#### *What helps*

- To recognize and express emotions
- To acknowledge changes
- To understand grief and know others experience similar responses

**As Life Goes On**  
*Mending the Heart*

**SOCIAL**

More interest in daily affairs of self/others  
Ability to reach out and meet others  
Energy for social visits and events

**PHYSICAL**

Physical symptoms subside  
Sleep pattern and appetites are more settled  
Gut-wrenching emptiness lightens

**EMOTIONAL**

Emotions are less intense  
Feeling of coming out of the fog  
More peace; less guilt

**MENTAL**

Increased perspective about the death  
Ability to remember with less pain  
Improved concentration and memory  
Dreams and nightmares decrease

**SPIRITUAL**

Reconnection with religious/spiritual beliefs  
Life has new meaning and purpose  
Acceptance of death as part of life cycle

*What helps*

- To reflect on progress since the death
- To begin envisioning a future
- To engage in new activities
- To establish new roles and relationships

We have chosen the image of the labyrinth as a metaphor for the journey through grief. A labyrinth is not a maze as there are no dead ends and no wrong turnings. There is only one way - forward. So it is with grief. The only way through is forward, with many turns and going back and forth over what seems like the same territory. We journey to the centre of our grief, to the centre of ourselves, and then slowly return to re-enter the world.

Each person's experience on the journey of grief will be different. This is a reflection of our personal style, our relationship with the person who died, our internal and social resources, and our past history of coping. As you journey through your own grief process, there will likely be unexpected turns and insights.

*For bereavement support in your area, call the BC Bereavement Helpline at 1-877-779-2223 or contact your local Hospice Society.*

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HEP  
Hospice Enhancement Program

**Partners**

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BC Hospice Palliative Care Association  
Living Through Loss Counseling Society  
White Rock Hospice Society

A program supported by United Way of the Lower Mainland

