

Grief: Coping with Challenges

Content courtesy of the Victoria Hospice Society

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The death of someone important to you brings many changes in your life. As you are adjusting and responding to these changes, there are challenges you will have to face. These could be about the death and the circumstances at the time, or about your grief and how you are coping. Here are some explanations and practical suggestions regarding common challenges.

Decision-making

Decision-making can be difficult when you are grieving. This is especially true when your partner has died and you do not have the usual person there to discuss plans, share decisions and consider consequences. Your memory, concentration and perspective may be affected by grief, leaving you with little confidence at this time. Postpone major decisions, if you can, until you are feeling better able to handle them. If you must make major decisions, consult with an objective professional. The following guidelines may help you tackle decision-making.

- Identify the problem and your goal precisely.
- List a variety of solutions - as many as you can think of.
- List the advantages and disadvantages of each solution.
- Outline the steps necessary for each solution.
- Consult an expert or trusted advisor who can be objective.
- Review all the information gathered, looking for oversights.
- Make your choice.
- Follow through step by step.

Financial affairs

Settling the estate can be a complex and exhausting task. Learning unfamiliar skills for dealing with financial affairs can be overwhelming when you are actively grieving. You may need or want help with paying bills, investing money, and planning your financial future. Hopefully, you will not have any dealings with disreputable individuals or anyone who will take advantage of your vulnerability. Be cautious and take your time about all financial decisions, following the suggestions below

- Legal advice and assistance may be helpful with the estate or other issues.
- Ask your bank for help.
- Seek the services of a qualified accountant or financial planner to assist you.
- Always use a well-respected individual or firm.
- Before making any major decisions or investments, even with known individuals, check your plans with your bank, your lawyer, or the Better Business Bureau.

Personal effects

Dealing with the personal belongings of the person who died can be very emotional. You may want to delay it because you do not have the energy, you are not up to the decisions, or you are comforted by the familiar presence. There is no particular time when this must be done, so do it when you feel ready. Doing it a bit at a time may make it manageable. Here are some helpful hints.

- Ask for help from a friend or family member.
- Sort things into categories: things to keep, things for family and friends, things for sale or charity, things to decide about later.
- Repeat as necessary.

Memories of recent events

Particularly in the early days of grief, you may find that you are frequently thinking about the circumstances of the illness and death. Recurring thoughts - about how the person looked or acted, about the care given, about what you and others did or didn't do, about how you heard the news are all common and natural. Repetition seems to help us come to terms with difficult or stressful times. Although these memories are pervasive now, memories of other times will return. The following strategies may help with coping.

- Go over memories as often as you need to.
- Talk to someone about your thoughts.
- Get the information you need to understand what happened.

Certain rooms and places

There may be certain rooms or places that you wish to avoid as they are associated with the death or the person who died. The courage required to face these places may return of its own accord. However, if your discomfort is intense and is interfering with your day-to-day life, you may wish to seek counselling help. The following strategies may help with coping.

- At home, sleep or eat elsewhere for a while, or rearrange the furniture.
- Away from home, if you need to go somewhere that is uncomfortable, get someone to accompany you or meet you.

Changes in relationships

You may find that other people have changed the way they relate to you since the death. Their attitudes, responses and expectations may be different. They may not be as understanding and supportive of your grief as you would like. Your own needs and responses may have changed also. Your energy for and interest in social activities may be limited. Loneliness and longing may affect your comfort and composure in social situations. Some suggestions for finding the support that you want are offered here.

- Spend time with people who are comfortable and welcoming.
- Let people know what helps you (small groups, familiar people, quiet activities, etc.).
- Consider support groups for bereaved people.

Special dates and events

The calendar is full of reminders of the person who died. Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, etc. will be times of missing and thinking of the person, especially during the first year. Planning ahead about how you want to acknowledge these times can be helpful. Give yourself permission to do things differently and review the suggestions given here.

- Do what feels best for you at the time.
- Be alone, or be with others.
- Go to the gravesite or another place where you feel close to the person who died.
- Find ways to honour your memories - work on a memorial album or journal.

Dreams and visitations

Many people have vivid dreams about the person who died, or hear, see or feel their presence. Often this is comforting, but occasionally it is not. You may be shy to share these experiences with others, but it is important to believe that your experience is real. Although grief experts say that the majority of bereaved people have these experiences, some people long for a sense of presence and do not have it. Some helpful strategies are listed below.

- If you are distressed about a dream or visitation, talk to a counsellor or spiritual advisor.
- Keep a journal or diary of your thoughts, dreams and experiences.
- Talk to a trusted friend.

Looking after your health

When you are grieving, your eating and sleeping patterns may change, as well as your general health. Fluctuations in energy are often part of grieving. Grief increases your risk for illness due to stress, fatigue, poor nutrition, indifference, etc. There is also a tendency to return to old patterns of coping, some of which may be detrimental to your health. It is important to look after your physical well-being as this can influence emotional healing after a loss. The following points are important to remember.

- Have regular check-ups and consult your doctor about any problems.
- Be careful of medications and alcohol as they mask rather than deal with the pain.
- Low energy is to be expected - pace your activities & responsibilities.
- Regular exercise is essential.

Sleep

Many bereaved people, though they feel exhausted, have trouble going to sleep or staying asleep through the night. Others find that they sleep more, to avoid the pain or due to exhaustion. Some helpful hints for sleeping are included here.

- Give yourself permission to sleep differently for a while.
- Hot milk or herbal tea may help you get to sleep; sleeping pills can be a temporary or occasional assist.
- Avoid stimulation (alcohol, coffee, television, and exercise) prior to bedtime; take time to unwind with a bath, relaxation exercises, light reading, or gentle music.
- Use a pillow or stuffed animal for comfort, to hold or rest behind your back.
- Don't force sleep; count sheep, recall a pleasant time in every detail, plan a trip or renovation, plot a novel.
- If unsuccessful getting to sleep or returning to sleep, after 30 minutes get up and do something pleasant and relaxing for a short period.

Eating

Your appetite and eating patterns are likely to change for a while; you may have no appetite or feel constantly hungry. Mealtimes can be difficult reminders of your loss. Food preparation, shopping, and nutritional meal planning may be new skills for you and may be things that highlight your loss. Here are some suggestions for dealing with nutrition and mealtimes.

- If eating alone is difficult change where you eat or where you sit at the table, accept invitations to meals, have people in for take-out.
- Try to eat regular healthy meals; avoid snacking on 'junk food.'
- Use ready-made nutritionally-designed meals from the freezer or deli section; stock up on healthy snacks.
- Consider regular dinner/lunch dates with family or friends, i.e., the first Thursday or every Monday.
- Recreational and seniors centres often have cooking classes, sharing kitchens, etc.



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.