

Life is a Journey

Grieving the Loss of a Loved One

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As Susan settles in for a mid-morning coffee, the phone rings. She hears the unbelievable words: “Jack has been hurt. They’ve taken him to the Emergency.”

She gathers her coat, purse, and car keys, wishing that her thoughts could be gathered as easily. The drive to the hospital is like no other. Then Susan walks into the hospital and is taken to a small office. Someone enters and she hears the words, “Mrs. M., I’m sorry...”

- Your experience may have been similar to Susan’s, leaving you with no time to prepare for the death of a loved one.
- Or maybe your experience was similar to Bill’s. Several years ago, his wife Kay started to feel unwell and decided to visit her primary health care provider. This was the beginning of many appointments with specialists, rounds of tests, and other health care visits. Treatments were started. Some were unpleasant and Kay needed to spend time in the hospital. Bill and Kay had good times, times they treasured, but then things got harder. Kay faced many changes. Kay and Bill soon realized they didn’t have much time left together. Then one day Bill left the hospital for the last time, this time alone.

The death of someone you love affects your whole being. The pain can feel overwhelming. You may wonder if you will be able to carry on. In the beginning, grief can feel like it will never go away. It can make you have feelings and thoughts you never had before.

Each person handles grief in their own way. But your experiences may be similar to others. This pamphlet describes some of the things you may experience.

Physical changes

- Shock is often the first reaction. Whether or not the death was expected, you may feel numbness and disbelief. Bewilderment, feeling like you are “in a fog”, and watching events happen around you but not feeling connected to them — all of these feelings help to protect you during these first days. As the fog lifts, the reality of your loss starts to sink in. You may be surprised by the physical changes in your body.

- You may have:
 - › Trouble sleeping
 - › No appetite or feel like eating more
 - › Tightness in your chest
 - › Less energy
 - › Dry mouth
 - › A feeling of a “lump in your throat”
 - › Muscle aches and pains
 - › Restlessness
 - › Tiredness

- These are all ways that your body shows you are under stress. **It is very important for you to look after yourself during this time.**
- Try to give your body what it needs to work well like:
 - › Gentle exercise (a daily walk, a swim, or whatever you enjoy doing) may help to improve your mood and relieve stress.
 - › Eating healthy foods will give your body the nourishment it needs during this stressful time. It may be hard to eat 3 meals a day. Try to choose snacks like fruits, vegetables, or cheese. Try to avoid alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine, if possible.
- You may not feel well — this is normal. This is a good time to ask your health care provider for help.

Emotions

- As you become more aware of your loss, your emotions may seem overwhelming. Sadness may seem to fill your life. Tears may come easily, at times and in situations that you do not expect.
- Crying is only one way to express your sadness. Sharing your thoughts with a supportive friend may help. It may be comforting to keep a journal and put your thoughts and feelings into words. When your heart is broken, you will find ways to care for yourself. Think about what has helped you in the past or try something new: a bath, a massage, or draw or paint a picture. You will figure out what works for you. These activities will not take away your grief, but they may give you needed breaks.

You may find yourself pining or yearning for the person.

- You may find yourself looking for your loved one in a crowd or expecting them to come home. At times these feelings may be so strong that you have the sense of hearing, smelling, touching, or seeing the person. These experiences can be comforting, as they remind you of the connection you shared. You may wonder if this is normal. Other people may wish to have these sensations, but do not.
- Mother's Day, Father's Day, anniversaries, and birthdays bring strong reminders of your loss. Seeing couples enjoying each other's company, or parents and children sharing special times, may make you feel jealous. It is natural that these special days and times will bring many memories. Planning for these times may help.
- Some families celebrate special days as they always have. Others find new ways to remember their loved one. Many people find that the days leading up to the event are worse than the day itself. It can be a bittersweet experience to plan for and celebrate these days, as you remember your loved one.

You may feel angry, furious, or full of rage.

- You may blame doctors and nurses for the how the death happened, funeral directors for not carrying out arrangements properly, family members for not giving enough support, or God for letting the person die. These emotions are not right or wrong, or good or bad. They are simply emotions. Talking about your feelings instead of keeping them inside will help you to feel and cope better. Try sharing these feelings with a trusted friend or counsellor who does not judge you. These feelings will change in intensity and length as you work through your grief.
- Sometimes you may feel that you did not do enough. You may think “If only I had made him go to the doctor earlier” or “If only I had stayed at the hospital longer.” These feelings of guilt are natural. You may feel guilty that you survived, thinking “I was supposed to go first.”
- You may feel ashamed as you experience relief from caregiving, financial strains, responsibilities, or watching the person suffer. There may be other things you do not miss (like dirty laundry, not taking out the garbage, “channel surfing”) and you may feel awkward about not missing them.

- These feelings and thoughts are a natural response to your loss.
- If you are having these kinds of thoughts, be compassionate, gentle, and kind with yourself. Take the time to review your thoughts. Ask yourself, “What could I have done differently in that situation, knowing what I knew then?” Perhaps you could have handled things differently. But you cannot change the past. Be gentle and forgiving with yourself as you think about this.
- As the reality of what your loss means to you becomes clear, feelings of anxiety, panic, and fear may come up.
- You may wonder:
 - › *“How will I survive without them?”*
 - › *“Am I going to be next?”*
 - › *“I can’t handle this.”*
 - › *“I’m so drained...how will I ever cope with this?”*

You have huge adjustments to make. These feelings of insecurity and fear are part of these adjustments.

What you can do

- If you talk about your feelings, you may start to see ways of coping with the situation. In your fear, you will find strength to go on. The first steps may be small ones (like finding the courage to go the Registry of Motor Vehicles and change the ownership of the car, or getting a plumber to fix the leaking tap), but you will find that you are able to do these things.
- You may feel very lonely as you deal with all of this. If it is your life partner who has died, there is no longer someone for you to share your thoughts, feelings, and accomplishments with. If it is your parent who has died, the person who has known you since birth is not there to share memories and experiences with you. This pain is especially hard to handle. Reach out to those around you who support you in a caring way, and who do not tell you to simply “get on with it.” Slowly over time, you will be able to take part in social activities with friends.

- This may be the time to pick up old hobbies again or start a new hobby that you never had time for. You will find people who have had similar losses who understand how you feel and describe grief as you do. Call 211 or visit <https://ns.211.ca/> for grief resources.
- Your faith may be a source of strength for you during this time, or you may find yourself questioning it. This wondering and questioning about the meaning and purpose of life are part of the journey of grief. Meditation, prayer, being part of a faith community, or finding new ways to experience your faith may help you on your journey.
- After a death, families often find themselves “out of balance”. Each family member mourns in their own way. At times they may not be able to support each other as expected. Each family also grieves in its own way. Over time, you will discover new ways to find comfort. Remembering your loved one together, looking at family pictures, retelling family stories, telling the next generation about your loved one, and taking time to talk together lets family members share their grief and also their healing.

Grief

- Grief is hard work. This is some of the hardest work you will ever do. You know in your head that the person has died, but understanding and accepting it in your heart may take weeks or months. Each time you think and talk about the person, their death will feel more real to you.
- This is a painful process, but it must be done. You will feel many emotions and may feel drained. It is not selfish to care for yourself and to find a safe place to mourn. If you avoid your feelings, you will only delay the experience of the pain.
- The time will come when you remember the person with love and affection, and no longer feel the pain of the loss as much. One day, for a short time, you will remember the person and the hurt will be less. You may laugh with a friend, enjoy the change of seasons, or see a new movie and feel good. This does not mean that you have forgotten your loved one. You are moving to a place where you can remember them lovingly. As you make this journey, you will find yourself changing as you learn to live without the person. This is one of the hardest parts of grief. You will survive.

It does not mean that you do not love the person — you will use what they have given you in your new life.

- You may discover strengths and abilities that you had not expected. You will gain a new sense of who you are without the person in your life. This does not mean that the person is forgotten — they will always be a part of you.
- You will remember them in a way that brings you comfort and peace.

Looking for more health information?

Find this pamphlet and all our patient resources here: <https://library.nshealth.ca/PatientEducation>

Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazines, and other resources.

For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time: call 811 or visit <https://811.novascotia.ca>

Learn about other programs and services in your community: call 211 or visit <http://ns.211.ca>

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The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years or as needed.