



Navigating the Waves of Grief

The Nature of Grief

Grief is a natural response to loss—whether it's the loss of a person, relationship, health, financial security, or another meaningful part of life. It is a deeply personal experience, involving a wide range of emotions and physical symptoms and changes in our thoughts and behaviour.

Grieving is often overwhelming and exhausting, yet it holds the potential for profound transformation. Everyone's journey is unique—there's no right way or timeline for grieving.

How Grief Affects the Brain: Understanding "Grief Brain"

Research shows that grief can temporarily alter brain function, affecting emotions and behaviors, often referred to as "grief brain." These changes highlight the complexity of grief and its impact on well-being.

Seeking support and learning about the grieving process are important steps toward healing. This guide is designed to provide understanding, tools, and support to help you navigate your grief..

Grief Beyond the Loss of a Loved One

Grief is often linked to the death of a loved one, but it extends beyond that. People also grieve deeply for other life-changing losses that impact their identity or well-being.

Grief Happens Outside of Death: Recognizing Non-Death Losses

Grief is not just the heartache felt with the death of someone; it spans a wide range of experiences, including non-death losses that can be equally impactful.



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Types of Non-Death Losses That Can Impact Grief

Though the nature of death and non-death losses may differ, both share a common thread: they involve adjusting to a life that has changed in ways we may not have chosen. These changes often include grappling with secondary losses, which can deepen the emotional impact of grief. Recognizing and validating the full spectrum of losses allows us to better understand our grief and seek the support we need. Grieving any kind of loss is deeply personal, and it's important to remember that your feelings are legitimate, no matter the nature of the loss.

Non-death losses can affect many aspects of life, each bringing its own unique challenges and emotions. Examples include:

- **The End of Relationships:** Divorce, separation, or the loss of a close friendship.
- **Loss of Health:** Coping with a chronic illness, injury, or a diagnosis that changes the way you live.
- **Financial Instability:** Experiencing job loss, bankruptcy, or the inability to meet basic needs.
- **Loss of a Pet:** Mourning the death of a beloved animal companion.
- **Miscarriage or Infertility:** The loss of a child not yet born or the dream of parenthood.
- **Retirement or Aging:** Losing a sense of purpose or identity tied to a career or youthful abilities.
- **Safety and Stability:** Experiencing trauma or a major life change that disrupts your sense of security.
- **Loss of Dreams or Goals:** Letting go of aspirations due to circumstances beyond your control.

By expanding the understanding of grief to include these diverse experiences and the concept of secondary losses, this guide aims to provide reassurance and support to anyone navigating the complex emotions that arise from both death and non-death losses.



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Understanding Secondary Losses

Grief is rarely just one loss. Secondary losses emerge from the primary event, adding layers to grief.

How Secondary Losses Deepen Grief

For example:

- The death of a loved one may also bring the loss of a shared future, financial support, or a sense of identity tied to the relationship.
- A divorce or breakup might mean losing a shared home, mutual friends, or traditions.
- Losing a job can result in the loss of financial security, daily structure, or self-esteem.

Secondary losses can add layers to grief, making it feel more complex and overwhelming. They may not always be obvious or immediately recognized, but they are an important part of the grieving process. Acknowledging these additional losses can help you better understand your feelings and take steps toward healing.

Types of Grief

Grief manifests in many ways, and is influenced by the nature of the loss, the individual and cultural background. Some common types of grief include:

- **Acute grief** is a powerful and complex experience that occurs in the early period after a loss. It involves strong emotions, insistent thoughts, and painful feelings like yearning, sorrow, anxiety, anger, remorse, guilt, or shame. It usually dominates one's life for a significant period of time, but it doesn't last forever. Activities are often focused on doing or not doing certain things to cope with the loss.
- **Ambiguous loss** refers to a type of loss that lacks clarity or resolution, leading to uncertainty or confusion about the status of the loss. Ambiguous loss comes in two forms:
 1. When someone is physically present but mentally absent, such as with dementia.
 2. When someone is physically absent but still psychologically present, like a loved one missing in war or a natural disaster.



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- **Anticipatory Grief:** This occurs before the actual loss, often in situations of terminal illness, allowing individuals to prepare emotionally for the loss.
- **Bereavement** is the grief and mourning experience following a death.
- **Collective Grief** occurs when a community or society experiences a shared loss, such as a natural disaster, terrorist attack, or public tragedy. It involves mourning as a collective group, with shared feelings of sadness, solidarity, and mourning rituals.
- **Complicated Grief:** Also known as prolonged grief disorder, it is a condition where acute grief persists for a long time due to interference in the healing process. It involves intense emotional pain such as sadness, loneliness, fear, anxiety, guilt, resentment, anger, or shame, and a feeling that their loved one might reappear. It may seem impossible to move forward without their loved one. It can severely impact one's functioning, often necessitating professional intervention.
- **Cumulative grief** refers to experiencing multiple losses over a short period of time. This can include various types of losses, such as the death of a loved one, a job loss, or a divorce. It can also occur when a person is still processing a significant loss and then experiences another one. The constant experience of loss after loss can lead to cumulative grief.
- **Disenfranchised Grief:** Not widely acknowledged or socially supported, this type of grief can result from losses like miscarriage or the death of a pet, making it particularly isolating.
- **Integrated grief** is a lasting form of grief that has a place in your life without dominating it or being overly influential in thoughts, feelings or behaviour. This form of grief is usually bittersweet and can be helpful in learning and growing in life. When grief is integrated, it mainly resides in the background, but it's often activated on certain calendar days, life events, or unexpected reminders of the loss. However, these moments do not mean that you have not adapted to your loss.
- **Grief** is the natural reaction to a loss.
- **Grief bursts**, also known as grief waves of grief, or sudden upsurges of grief, are sudden, unexpected and intense surges of emotions experienced by those who are grieving, triggered by reminders of the loss. They can cause feelings of sadness, longing, anger, or despair, often accompanied by physical sensations. These bursts are a natural part of the grieving process and vary in frequency and intensity.



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- **Grieving** is the way that grief changes over time without actually going away. At first, it can be intense and painful. Over time, it usually becomes less intense. However, you can experience intense feelings during certain times of the year, like birthdays or anniversaries.
- **Mourning** is the outward expression of grief.
- **Prolonged grief disorder:** a psychiatric diagnosis characterized by intense longing and preoccupation with thoughts of a deceased loved one, leading to significant distress and difficulty in performing daily tasks. For a diagnosis, the death must have occurred at least one year prior for adults and six months for children and adolescents. The person must also have at least three of the following symptoms nearly every day for the last three months prior to diagnosis: identity disruption, marked disbelief, avoidance, emotional pain, difficulty with reintegration, emotional numbness, feeling of meaninglessness, and intense loneliness.
- **Secondary or Vicarious Grief** refers to the experience of mourning for the loss experienced by others, such as when supporting a grieving friend or family member. It can also occur in professions where individuals regularly encounter others' grief, such as healthcare workers or first responders.
- **Traumatic grief** is the response to a sudden, unexpected loss often associated with a traumatic event. It can be related to complicated and or prolonged grief disorder. People often experience (but are not limited to) nightmares, difficulty sleeping, flashbacks, numbness, fear and anxiety.

The Impact of Grief on the Brain, Body, and Stress Response

Grief is a full-body response that affects emotions, cognition, and physical health, often triggering a stress response. Understanding how grief impacts different aspects of our well-being can help us recognize what we're experiencing as a natural process and find ways to care for ourselves.



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Grief and Attachment: Why Loss Hurts So Much

Grief feels overwhelming because of the way we form connections, or "attachments," with the people we care about most. From the time we're little, our earliest relationships—usually with caregivers—teach us how to connect with others. These bonds help us feel safe and secure and are at the heart of what makes us human.

When someone we love is no longer with us, it's like a part of that bond is torn away. This creates a deep sense of loss, which is what we experience as grief. How we navigate grief depends a lot on the types of connections we've had in our lives:

- **If you've felt safe and supported in your relationships**, you might find it easier to cope because your nervous system has learned that comfort and stability are available, even in difficult times.
- **If your experiences have been more difficult or insecure**, grief can feel even more overwhelming. The loss might bring up past wounds or make it harder to trust that you'll be okay without them.

But what if the person you lost was your safe person—the one who made the world feel steady and secure?

Losing a safe person can feel like the ground has been pulled out from beneath you. It's not just grief over their absence—it can create a deep sense of vulnerability, disorientation, or even panic. You may feel like you don't know how to exist without them, especially if they were the one who helped you feel emotionally regulated and secure.

This type of loss can **complicate grief** in profound ways:

- You may struggle with **feeling unsafe or disconnected from others**.
- The **absence of their comfort** can make emotions feel even more intense.
- You might feel **lost** in relationships unsure of who to turn to for support.

If this resonates with you, it's important to know that grief doesn't mean you have to figure it out alone. Seeking out a compassionate support system—whether through trusted friends, community, or a professional—can help you find new ways to feel safe while honoring the connection you had with your person.



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How Grief Impacts the Brain, Body, and Stress Response

Grief doesn't just affect your emotions—it impacts your whole body. When you lose someone, your brain registers the loss as a threat, triggering the nervous system and activating a stress response. Research shows that the brain and body are deeply connected, so grief can bring physical symptoms like tension, fatigue, or trouble focusing. These reactions are your body's way of attempting to cope with the deep impact of loss.

Because grief is processed through both the brain and body, it affects multiple systems at once—emotionally, physically, and neurologically. This connection is deeply rooted in somatic science, which helps explain why grief can feel so overwhelming.

1. Emotional Reactions of Grief

Grief can feel like an emotional rollercoaster, with emotions that come and go in waves, often catching you off guard. One moment, you might feel okay, and the next, you're overwhelmed. Remember, all of these feelings are valid and are part of the natural process of grieving.

Common experiences include:

- **Sadness or despair:** A deep longing for what you've lost.
- **Anger:** Feeling upset at the situation, others, or even the person you've lost.
- **Guilt:** Questioning if you could have done something differently.
- **Fear or anxiety:** Worrying about the future or changes in your life.
- **Relief:** Especially if the loss ended a long period of suffering or hardship.
- **Numbness:** A lack of emotional reaction, as the brain's way of protecting you from overwhelming emotions.

2. Physical Reactions of Grief

Grief's impact often shows up in the body, creating physical symptoms that reflect the stress and emotional strain you're experiencing. These can include:

- **Fatigue and low energy:** Emotional exhaustion can leave you physically drained.
- **Tightness in the chest or difficulty breathing:** This can mirror the emotional pain of loss.
- **Muscle tension or aches:** Grief often creates physical tension, especially in the shoulders, neck, and back.



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- **Digestive issues:** Nausea, stomach pain, or changes in digestion are common responses to stress.
- **Headaches or migraines:** Grief-related tension can lead to frequent headaches.
- **Sleep disturbances:** Difficulty falling or staying asleep or sleeping too much.
- **Changes in appetite:** Eating more or less than usual.
- **Headaches, chest pain, or digestive issues:** Physical symptoms that can reflect emotional stress.
- **Weakened immune system:** Making you more susceptible to colds or other illnesses.

These symptoms are the body's way of responding to the emotional pain of loss, as it interprets this pain as a threat and activates the stress response system. While these physical reactions are normal, it's important to care for your body during this time and seek medical support if symptoms feel overwhelming or persistent.

3. How Grief Affects the Brain

Grief is more than just an emotional experience—it also affects how your brain works. Mary-Frances O'Connor, neuroscientist and author of *The Grieving Brain*, explains that grief activates specific parts of the brain, particularly the limbic system. This area, often called the brain's emotional center, processes emotions and memories. Grief activates the limbic system, intensifying emotions, resurfacing memories, and altering thinking and behaviour.

Many people experiencing grief notice cognitive changes, often referred to as "grief brain" or "grief fog." These changes can make it harder to focus, remember details, or make decisions—even simple ones. These symptoms are your brain's way of processing the loss and adapting to a new reality. Over time, as the brain begins to heal, these symptoms typically improve.

Grief can affect how you think and process information, leading to various challenges in daily life. Common effects include:

- **Difficulty focusing:** Tasks that were once simple may feel impossible.
- **Memory lapses:** Forgetting details or struggling to recall information.
- **Impaired decision-making:** Even small choices can feel overwhelming.



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- **Heightened emotions:** Grief makes the brain's limbic system (emotional centre), which processes emotions and memories, more active. This can intensify feelings and bring memories to the surface.

These neurological changes are your brain's way of processing the loss and adapting to a new reality. Over time, as the brain begins to heal, these symptoms typically improve.

Grief as a Stress Response

Understanding the Grief-Stress Connection

One aspect of grief that is often overlooked is its close connection to stress. Grief doesn't just affect your emotions—it's a full-body response to loss. Emotional pain, like grief, activates the nervous system triggering a stress response.

When we experience loss, the brain perceives it as a danger or threat, activating survival mechanisms to help us cope. Research shows that the brain and body are deeply connected, so grief can create both physical and neurological reactions, including:

- **Increased cortisol levels**, which can affect sleep, digestion, and immune function.
- **Heightened alertness**, making it hard to relax or focus.
- **Chronic tension**, particularly in the muscles and nervous system.

These responses are the body's way of trying to manage the deep impact of loss. While they are natural, they can also be exhausting and overwhelming. Understanding how grief affects your body, brain, and emotions can help you recognize these responses as normal and find ways to care for yourself during this time.

Common Stress-Related Symptoms During Grief

Grief-related stress can manifest in many ways, including:

- **Fatigue:** Feeling physically and emotionally drained.
- **Tension or aches:** Especially in the neck, shoulders, and back.
- **Rapid heartbeat:** A sense of unease or heightened awareness.
- **Difficulty sleeping:** Struggling to fall or stay asleep or sleeping too much.
- **Appetite changes:** Eating more or less than usual.



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- **Digestive issues:** Upset stomach, nausea, or changes in bowel habits.
- **Headaches or migraines:** Often caused by tension and stress.
- **Feeling "on edge":** A constant sense of restlessness or irritability.

Long-Term Impacts and Healing in Grief

Grief affects us deeply, both in the short term and over time. While many symptoms of grief lessen as we adjust to loss, unresolved or prolonged grief can have lasting effects on physical, emotional, and mental health. At the same time, grief can also evolve into a source of growth, offering opportunities for deeper understanding and resilience.

Potential Long-Term Health Impacts

Grief can leave lasting imprints on the body and mind, particularly when it becomes prolonged or unresolved. Common long-term effects include:

- **Increased Inflammation:** Grief can elevate inflammation levels in the body, which are linked to chronic health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and autoimmune disorders.
- **Weakened Immune System:** Persistent stress from grief can make the body more vulnerable to infections and illnesses.
- **Higher Risk of Heart Problems:** Intense grief is associated with conditions like "broken heart syndrome," which mimics a heart attack, and an increased risk of heart disease.
- **Chronic Stress:** Ongoing grief can keep the body in a heightened state of stress, leading to fatigue, tension, and difficulty regulating emotions.
- **Mental Health Challenges:** If grief remains unresolved, it may lead to conditions like depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Understanding these potential long-term effects highlights the importance of seeking support and practicing self-care. Addressing grief proactively can help protect both your emotional and physical health.



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The Evolution of Grief Over Time

Grief is not something you "get over," but rather something you learn to live with as it evolves. Initially, grief may feel all-consuming, dominating your thoughts and emotions. Over time, the intensity often softens, and you begin to adjust to life without the person or thing you've lost. This adjustment process sometimes referred to as "integrated grief," allows the loss to take its place in your life without overshadowing other aspects of your experience.

While grief changes, it doesn't disappear. Anniversaries, milestones, and unexpected reminders may bring strong emotions even years later. These moments are natural and do not mean you've regressed. Instead, they are opportunities to reflect on your journey and the enduring connection you have with what you've lost.

The 18-24 Month Mark: When Grief Resurfaces

Grief is often most recognized and supported in the immediate aftermath of a loss. Friends and family may offer meals, check in regularly, and help you navigate the "firsts" without your loved one—your first birthday without them, the first holiday, or the first anniversary of their passing. This period is filled with emotional intensity, but it's also when support is typically at its highest. Around 18 to 24 months after a loss, support often fades, and others may assume you're 'back to normal.' This can be an especially challenging time. By this stage, the practical support and attention often fade, and those around you may assume that life has returned to normal. This period I sometimes refer to as "**after the casseroles**"—when the casserole meals, check-ins, and consistent presence of support have largely stopped, leaving you to navigate grief more independently. For many, this stage brings an unexpected upsurge in emotions and challenges, often catching them off guard.

Why Grief Resurfaces "After the Casseroles"

1. The Reality of Permanence

- During the first year, the focus is often on "getting through" major milestones and coping with immediate emotions. By the second year, the absence of your loved one—or the reality of your loss—can feel more permanent, deepening the sense of grief.



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2. Diminished Support

- Friends and family who were present in the early stages of grief often assume you are "better" or "moving on" by this time. Their attention turns back to their daily lives, leaving you feeling isolated just as you're grappling with deeper layers of loss.

3. Delayed Emotional Processing

- The early months of grief are often focused on survival—handling immediate responsibilities, adjusting to new routines, and coping with acute emotions. As life settles, emotions that were put on hold may resurface with unexpected intensity.

4. Emotional and Physical Fatigue

- Grieving is exhausting, and the prolonged emotional labour can lead to fatigue, making it harder to manage new waves of sadness or longing.

How to Navigate This Stage of Grief

1. Rebuild Your Support Network

- **Reconnect:** Let trusted loved ones know how you're feeling and that you still need their support. Honest conversations can help rebuild connections.
- **Seek Professional Help:** If grief feels overwhelming or unmanageable, consider reaching out to a counsellor, therapist, or grief support group.

2. Honour Your Feelings

- **Validate Your Emotions:** It's okay to feel that grief has resurfaced. These feelings are not a setback—they're a natural part of the grieving process.
- **Create Meaningful Rituals:** Honor your loved one's memory through rituals such as lighting a candle, journaling, or dedicating time to reflect on their life.

3. Prepare for Milestones and Triggers

- Recognize that upcoming anniversaries or unexpected reminders may stir emotions. Plan ahead by scheduling self-care activities or appropriate supports..

4. Prioritize Self-Care

- **Recommit to Basics:** Ensure you're getting enough sleep, nourishing meals, and physical activity.
- **Mindfulness and Reflection:** Use mindfulness, meditation, or creative outlets to process emotions.
- **Pace Yourself:** Grief can feel overwhelming—honour your limits and take breaks as needed.



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Moving Forward with Compassion

The 18- to 24-month mark, which I often refer to as "after the casseroles," is a time when the absence of structured support can feel especially profound. Recognizing this stage as a natural part of the grief journey allows you to approach it with patience and self-compassion. By honouring your emotions, seeking support, and caring for your well-being, you can navigate this phase with resilience and continue to integrate your loss into a meaningful life.

Grief doesn't end—it evolves. This stage is an opportunity to deepen your connection to your loss while finding strength and purpose in the journey ahead.

Diversity in Cultural Grieving Practices

Grief is shaped not only by individual experiences but also by the culture we come from. Culture encompasses more than ethnicity or nationality—it also includes family traditions, community norms, and personal beliefs. Each of these cultural layers influences how we process loss, express emotions, and honour loved ones.

For example, some cultures emphasize outward expressions of grief, such as public mourning rituals, while others value a more private, introspective approach. Family culture also plays a significant role in shaping expectations about how grief is handled—whether openly discussed or kept within the family.

Recognizing that grief practices vary widely can help us better understand and respect the ways others navigate loss. It also reminds us that there is no "right" way to grieve, and everyone's traditions and coping mechanisms are valid.

Whether your cultural grieving practices are rooted in ethnicity, religion, or family traditions, they can provide comfort, structure, and a sense of connection during a difficult time. Exploring or honouring these practices can be an important part of your healing journey.



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Finding Your Way Through Grief

Sometimes, it helps to have support as you work through the pain of loss. A compassionate approach can make all the difference by focusing on the emotions tied to your grief and helping you make sense of what you're feeling. By exploring these emotions in a safe space, you can rebuild a sense of emotional security and find a way to move forward.

Here's how this kind of support can help:

- **Feeling Safe to Open Up:** Having someone you trust to talk to makes it easier to share what's on your mind and heart without fear of judgment. Building trust with a supportive person or therapist creates the foundation for healing.
- **Naming Your Feelings:** Grief can be confusing, bringing up emotions like sadness, anger, or guilt. Identifying and expressing these feelings helps you understand what you're experiencing.
- **Understanding the Impact:** Reflecting on how your past relationships and experiences shape your grief can help you see patterns, make sense of your emotions, and create a new way of thinking about your loss. Grief often arises from the broken connection with someone who was deeply important to you, and your brain works hard to process this change. It tries to make sense of the loss by replaying memories, seeking explanations, or even feeling like the bond is still present. Understanding this process can help you recognize that these responses are natural and a part of how your mind works to adjust to the absence of that connection.
- **Finding Strength in Your Emotions:** Grief is rooted in love and connection. By focusing on feelings like love or gratitude for the person you've lost, you can find comfort, hope, and strength to move forward.

Grief is hard because it comes from the love and bonds we share. With the right support, you can honour what you've lost, understand your feelings, and begin to heal in a way that feels right for you.



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The Role of Time and Support

Healing from grief is not linear, and there is no set timeline. What's most important is allowing yourself the time and space to process emotions, seek support, and discover coping strategies that work for you. Over time, you may find ways to balance the pain of loss with the joys of life, creating a narrative that acknowledges your grief while embracing the possibilities of the future. Grief evolves, and so do you. With patience, self-compassion, and support, it is possible to move forward—not by forgetting but by integrating the loss into a life that holds both meaning and connection.

Navigating Your Way Through the Waves of Grief

Grief is a deeply personal and ever-changing experience. There is no right way or wrong way to grieve and no set timeline for healing—each person's journey is unique. You will carry your grief with you for life. Recognizing and accepting your pain is an essential first step, but finding ways to navigate the challenges of grief can help you move forward with greater resilience and understanding.

Strategies to Cope with Grief

Grief often triggers intense emotional and physical stress. The strategies listed below, including somatic and mindfulness-based practices, can help manage the stress response, ease emotional pain, and support your body and mind through the healing process.

1. Acknowledgment

- **Recognize And Acknowledge Your Grief:** Make space to feel sad or celebrate your loved one as you would have in the past. Honour their memory in a way that feels right to you. It's okay to say no to events or obligations if you need to, even if it means staying home and watching TV.
- **Make Space for the Stress:** It's okay to feel out of sorts—this is a normal part of grieving.



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2. Navigating Triggers: Preparing for and Managing Emotional Surges

Grief often brings emotional triggers—moments when feelings of loss suddenly surface, catching you off guard. Triggers might include anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, or seemingly small reminders, like a song or a scent. While some triggers are predictable and can be anticipated, others can arise unexpectedly, leaving you feeling unprepared. Developing strategies to navigate these moments can help you regain a sense of control and reduce their intensity.

Recognizing Triggers as Part of Grief

Triggers are a natural part of grief, but they don't have to control your day. With preparation and self-compassion, you can navigate these moments and keep moving forward.

Anticipating Known Triggers: Planning for known triggers can make them feel less overwhelming.

- **Create a Plan:** Decide in advance how you want to spend significant dates. You might choose to mark the day with meaningful activities, like visiting your loved one's favourite place, lighting a candle, or writing in a journal. Alternatively, you might plan a distraction, like watching a favourite movie or spending time with supportive friends or family.
- **Express Emotions Freely:** Allow yourself to feel the emotions that arise on these days. Expression can be through talking, journaling, or creative activities. If you feel stuck, set a timer for the amount of time you're comfortable feeling those emotions, then follow it with a grounding activity, like going for a walk or calling a friend.
- **Build a Support System:** Let trusted friends or family members know about important dates or potential triggers so they can check in or provide support.
- **Set Boundaries:** Give yourself permission to say no to obligations or events that feel too overwhelming.



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Managing Unexpected Triggers:

When an emotional trigger takes you by surprise, it can feel disorienting. Having the tools to ground yourself in the moment can help.

- **Pause and Breathe:** Take a few deep breaths to calm your nervous system. Try a technique like box breathing (inhaling for 4 counts, holding for 4, exhaling for 4, and holding for 4).
- **Grounding Techniques:** Use physical sensations to bring yourself back to the present moment. Examples include:
 - **5-4-3-2-1 Exercise:** Identify 5 things you see, 4 you can touch, 3 you can hear, 2 you can smell, and 1 you can taste.
 - Hold a comforting object, like a piece of fabric or a keepsake, and focus on its texture.
- **Shift Your Environment:** If possible, change your surroundings. Step outside for fresh air, take a short walk or move to a space where you feel safe and supported.
- **Name the Trigger:** Acknowledge the trigger for what it is—a reminder of your loss. Remind yourself that the feelings it stirs up, though painful, are a natural part of grief.
- **Create a Soothing Ritual:** Develop a simple ritual to use when a trigger arises, such as repeating a calming phrase, sipping tea, or listening to a comforting song.

3. The Power of Self-Compassion

- **Be Kind to Yourself:** Treat yourself with kindness and understanding. Recognize that you're doing the best you can in a difficult situation.
- **Common Humanity:** Understand that grief is a universal experience, and you are not alone in your pain.
- **Practice Mindfulness:** Be present with your emotions without judgment. Mindfully acknowledging your grief and stress can help you process and heal.

4. Somatic and Body-Based Practices

- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Tense and release muscle groups to ease physical tension.



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- **Body Movement:** Gentle activities like yoga, tai chi, or walking can help release stress stored in the body.
- **Grounding Techniques:** Focus on sensations like your feet on the ground or a comforting object to stay present.
- **Self-Holding:** Place your hands on your chest or abdomen for a calming effect.

5. Breathing Techniques

- **Box Breathing:** Inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4, exhale for 4, and hold again for 4.
- **4-7-8 Breathing:** Inhale for 4 counts, hold for 7, and exhale for 8.
- **Long Exhale Breathing:** Double the length of your exhale to trigger relaxation.
- **Deep Belly Breathing:** Focus on breathing into your stomach, feeling your hand rise and fall.

6. Grief Work and Rituals

- **Express Your Emotions:** Cry if you need to or find creative outlets like journaling or art.
- **Honour Your Loved One:** Light a candle, create a memory book, or visit a meaningful place.
- **Therapy Tools:** Explore different modalities of working through grief with a counsellor or therapist.

7. Self-Care:

Taking care of yourself is crucial when grieving. Physical health has a significant impact on mental well-being, and even small acts of self-care can support healing. Here are some ways to nurture yourself during this challenging time:

- **Prioritize Basic Needs:** Make sure you're getting enough sleep, eating a balanced diet, and moving your body, even if it's just a short walk.
- **Practice Mindfulness:** Use relaxation techniques like deep breathing, meditation, or yoga to manage stress.
- **Listen to Your Body:** Rest when you need to, and don't push yourself beyond your limits.
- **Move Your Body:** Physical activity, like gentle yoga, stretching, or walking, can help release tension and support emotional healing. Remember, emotions need motion.
- **Practice Mindfulness:** Use techniques like deep breathing, meditation, or yoga to calm your nervous system and reduce stress. Spiritual practices can also offer comfort and solace.



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- **Engage in Comforting Activities:** Pursue hobbies or creative outlets such as journaling, painting, or listening to music to bring moments of peace.
- **Create a Self-Care Retreat:** Treat yourself to small comforts like ordering in food, taking a warm bath, or setting up a cozy space to relax.
- **Connect with Nature:** Spend time outdoors or even near a window. Nature can have a grounding and soothing effect, helping to clear your mind and recharge your energy.
- **Tuning Into Yourself: Grief can feel overwhelming, so it's important to regularly check in with yourself:**
 - Pause and ask what you need in the moment—whether it's a soothing strategy, distraction, or time to process your feelings.
 - Honour your own pace and know that it's okay to change plans or take breaks.

8. Building Resilience Over Time

- **Regular Reflection:** Keeping a journal or creating a loss experience graph can help track emotional patterns and triggers, aiding in recognizing and managing them more effectively.
- **Reflect and Learn:** After experiencing a trigger, take time to reflect. What helped you manage it? What could you try next time? Journaling about these experiences can provide insight and a sense of progress.
- **Celebrate Small Wins:** Acknowledge moments when you successfully navigated a trigger. These victories, no matter how small, build resilience.
- **Seek Support:** Engaging with friends, family, professional help, or a support group can provide the necessary comfort and understanding. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness; everyone needs support.

9. Caring for Your Brain and Body During Grief

Grief can take a toll on both your mental and physical health, making self-care essential for healing. Supporting your body helps stabilize your emotions, as physical health plays a significant role in mental well-being. Here are ways to nurture yourself during this time:

- **Rest:** Allow yourself extra sleep or downtime.
- **Eat Regularly:** Even small, healthy meals can help stabilize your energy. (Leave out healthy snacky foods within reach, such as a bowl of nuts or fruits)
- **Move Your Body:** Activities like walking, stretching, or yoga can ease tension and promote emotional release. Remember, emotions need motion.



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- **Practice Mindfulness:** Deep breathing, mindfulness or meditation can calm your nervous system. (Ask for a list of mindfulness and other strategies, or see the resource section of the Inner Sojourn website)
- **Engage in Comforting Activities:** Pursue hobbies or creative outlets that bring you joy or peace, such as journaling, painting, or listening to music.
- **Connect with Nature:** Spend time outdoors or near a window to feel grounded and recharged. Even small interactions with the natural world, like walking on grass or sitting in sunlight, can be soothing.
- **Enjoy an At-Home Retreat:** Take time for small acts of self-care, like ordering food, enjoying a warm bath, or creating a cozy space to rest.
- **Seek Connection:** Share your feelings with trusted loved ones, seek professional help, or join a support group to feel less alone in your grief.

Finding Meaning and Growth in Grief

For some, the grieving process becomes a pathway to personal growth and understanding. This concept, known as post-traumatic growth, highlights the positive changes that can emerge from navigating significant loss. While not everyone experiences this, those who do often find:

- **A New Perspective:** A clearer sense of what truly matters, leading to greater appreciation for relationships and small joys.
- **Strength and Resilience:** An understanding of their capacity to endure hardship and adapt to change.
- **Deeper Empathy:** A heightened ability to connect with and support others facing similar challenges.
- **Purpose and Legacy:** Ways to honour their loss, such as advocating for a cause, creating art, or helping others.

Continuing Bonds: Honouring the Connection

Grief doesn't mean letting go of the person you've lost—it's about finding new ways to maintain the bond and keep their memory alive in your life. This approach, known as continuing bonds, helps integrate the relationship with your loved one into your ongoing journey, offering comfort and a sense of connection.



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Ways to Continue the Connection

1. Create a Memory Box

- Gather mementos, letters, photos, or items that remind you of your loved one and store them in a special box. This can become a comforting way to revisit cherished memories.

2. Talk with Them

- Speak to your loved one in your thoughts or out loud, sharing your feelings or updating them on your life. Many find this practice grounding and soothing.

3. Visit Meaningful Places

- Spend time at their gravesite, a favourite park, or a place that holds special meaning to you both. Being in these spaces can feel like a tangible connection.

4. Write Letters

- Journaling or writing letters to your loved one can help you express emotions, reflect on memories, and feel closer to them.

5. Celebrate Special Days

- Honour birthdays, anniversaries, or holidays by lighting a candle, making their favourite dish, or participating in an activity they enjoyed.

6. Share Their Story

- Keep their memory alive by sharing stories about them with friends or family. Talking about their life can help you feel connected and preserve their legacy.

7. Involve Them in Your Life

- Include their memory in your day-to-day life, whether by carrying a small item that reminds you of them, creating art inspired by them, or dedicating achievements to their honour.

8. Support Their Causes

- Volunteer, donate, or participate in activities they were passionate about to feel connected to their values and interests.

Why Continuing Bonds Matter

Continuing bonds remind us that love doesn't end with loss—it transforms. Finding ways to maintain the connection can provide comfort, reduce feelings of isolation, and help you integrate their memory into your life. This ongoing bond is not about holding on to pain but embracing the love and memories that remain.



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Creating Boundaries for Grief: Finding a Safe Space for Emotions

Grief can feel all-encompassing, and at times, it might seem like there's no room for anything else. While it's important to allow grief its space, it can also be helpful to create boundaries so it doesn't overwhelm you in moments when you need to focus or function. This isn't about shutting your grief down or ignoring it—it's about giving it a safe place to rest until you're ready to face it again.

A Safe Space for Grief

One way to set these boundaries is to imagine a safe, comforting space for your grief to go. This could be a real, physical spot, or it could exist entirely in your mind.

For example, one client created a basket with a warm, fuzzy blanket and a stuffed animal that they left in their car. When grief became too much at work, they imagined asking their grief to crawl into the basket and wait there. This allowed them to acknowledge their feelings without being consumed by them. Later, when they were ready, they would "pick up" their grief and spend time with it.

Why This Works

This strategy aligns with the principles of Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapy, which sees emotions like grief as parts of ourselves that need attention, not suppression. When we push down or try to "lock away" grief, it doesn't disappear—it builds up pressure inside, often emerging later in ways that feel even harder to manage. Instead of sealing grief in a jar and closing the lid, the idea is to honour it, give it a temporary resting place, and commit to coming back to it when you can.

How to Create a Safe Space for Grief

Here are some steps to try:

1. **Imagine or Create the Space:** Choose a place where your grief can "go." This could be a physical object like a basket, a room in your home, or even an imaginary spot like a cozy cabin or garden.
2. **Acknowledge Your Grief:** When grief feels overwhelming, take a moment to acknowledge it. You might say, "I see you, grief. I know you're here."



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3. **Gently Ask Grief to Rest:** Imagine guiding your grief to the safe space. Let it know you're not abandoning it—you're just asking it to rest for a little while so you can focus.
1. **Commit to Returning:** Tell yourself (and your grief) that you'll come back when you're ready. This promise is crucial to avoid feelings of repression or avoidance.
2. **Visit the Space When You're Ready:** When you have time and energy, revisit your grief in its safe space. This might involve journaling, talking to someone, or just sitting quietly with your feelings.

The Importance of Balance

This approach helps you honour your grief while still managing daily life. It keeps you connected to your emotions without feeling consumed by them. Remember, grief isn't something to fight against or push away—it's a part of you that needs care and attention, just like any other emotion.

By creating a safe space for your grief, you can honour it while also honouring your own need for moments of peace and focus.

Using the Reverse: Inviting Grief Into Your Space

If you find grief too overwhelming, you can do the opposite and invite it into your safe space. For instance, one client placed a locket with their loved one's ashes in their safe space. When overwhelmed, they would sit there and allow themselves to feel their grief.

- **Set a Timer:** Dedicate a small amount of time to sit with your grief—5 seconds, 5 minutes, or whatever feels manageable.
- **Feel Your Emotions:** During this time, allow yourself to fully experience the grief without judgment or trying to push it away.
- **Transition with a Plan:** When the timer goes off, engage in a planned activity to shift your focus, such as:
 - Taking a walk
 - Calling a friend
 - Listening to music
 - Journaling your thoughts
 - Doing something physical, like stretching or stepping outside for fresh air



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This practice helps you gradually integrate grief into your daily life without letting it overwhelm you.

Big Emotions and Boundaries

This approach also works for other intense emotions, like anger or sadness, especially if you fear they'll last too long or become uncontrollable.

- **Set a Timer:** Choose how long you're willing to sit with the emotion, knowing there's an endpoint.
- **Feel the Emotion:** Let yourself fully experience the feeling during the set time.
- **Engage in an Activity:** When the timer rings, immediately transition to something you've planned, such as:
 - Calling a friend
 - Listening to calming music
 - Journaling your thoughts
 - Moving your body, like stretching or taking a walk

Why This Works

These strategies align with the idea that grief and big emotions are parts of you that need attention, not suppression. When you push emotions down or try to ignore them, they tend to build up, becoming harder to manage later. Instead, by setting intentional boundaries, you honor your feelings while maintaining control over how and when to process them.

Grief is rooted in love and connection. By creating a safe space for your emotions, you can care for them with kindness and find balance as you navigate the healing process.



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Resources for Grief Support and Coping Strategies

Navigating grief can feel overwhelming, but many resources are available to provide support, tools, and information to help you on your journey. Below is a list of trusted sources where you can find coping strategies, community connections, and professional guidance.

Inner Sojourn Resources

Visit the [Inner Sojourn Resource Section](#) to explore a variety of coping strategies, videos, and articles. This section also includes curated recommendations for books, mindfulness techniques, and additional websites to support your healing process.

Grief Websites

- [Canadian Virtual Hospice - MyGrief.ca](#)
 - Offers comprehensive grief support, education, and tools tailored to your needs.
- [What's Your Grief](#)
 - A practical and compassionate site offering articles, podcasts, and resources for all types of grief.
- [Refuge in Grief](#)
 - Created by Megan Devine, this site offers heartfelt and practical support for navigating loss and grief.
- [The Dougy Center](#)
 - A leading resource for grief support, particularly for children, teens, and their families.
- [Compassionate Friends](#)
 - Provides support for families grieving the loss of a child, sibling, or grandchild.
- [Center for Loss & Life Transition](#)
 - Offers educational resources and support for those navigating grief and bereavement.
- [Grief.com](#)
 - Founded by David Kessler, this site offers resources, articles, and courses to help individuals better understand and process their grief.



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Crisis and Helplines

If you are struggling and need immediate support, these hotlines are available:

- **Canada:** Talk Suicide Canada – 1-833-456-4566 or text 45645
- **Canada:** 988
- **United States:** National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- **United Kingdom:** Samaritans – 116 123
- **Worldwide:** [Befrienders International](#) – Find a helpline in your region

Books and Reading Materials

For deeper insights into grief and coping, consider these well-regarded books:

- *The Grieving Brain* by Mary-Frances O'Connor
- *It's OK That You're Not OK* by Megan Devine
- *Bearing the Unbearable* by Joanne Cacciatore
- *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief* by David Kessler
- *Option B* by Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant
- For a larger list visit www.innersojourn.net Grief Resources

Final Thoughts: Navigating Grief in Your Own Way

Grief is a journey as unique as the person experiencing it. While the pain of loss may feel overwhelming, it is also a reflection of the love and connection you shared. There is no "right" way to grieve, and healing does not follow a set timeline. Some may feel intense emotions, while others experience numbness—both are natural. It's okay to take the time you need to process your grief in your own way.

What matters most is allowing yourself space to honor your emotions, care for your body and mind, and reach out for support when you need it. Whether through self-care, meaningful rituals, or maintaining a lasting bond with your loved one, you can find ways to integrate grief into your life. While grief does not end, it evolves. With time and compassion, it can become a part of your story that holds both meaning and love.

You do not have to navigate this alone. There are resources, communities, and people ready to walk alongside you. Explore them at your own pace, and when you need support, know that reaching out is a strength. Grief changes, but so do you—and healing is possible.