



Surviving the Early Days of Loss

The Acute Phase of Grief: What to Expect

Grieving is different for everyone—there is no right or wrong way to do it. Your experience is unique and however, you feel is valid.

Common Early Grief Experiences

The first days and weeks after a loss can feel surreal. Some people describe this period as being "numb" or "frozen," while others feel overwhelmed by waves of intense emotions. This acute phase of grief is the body and mind's way of protecting you as you begin to process an unimaginable reality.

Common reactions include:

- **Shock and disbelief** – Feeling detached or like you're watching life happen from the outside.
- **Emotional numbness** – Your brain may temporarily shut down intense emotions to prevent overwhelm.
- **Intense emotions** – Rapid mood shifts, ranging from sorrow to anger to moments of calm.
- **Forgetfulness and disorientation** – Grief impacts cognition, making it difficult to focus or make decisions.
- **Physical symptoms** – Extreme fatigue, headaches, nausea, muscle tension, changes in appetite, sleep disturbances.
- **Fight, flight, freeze, or fawn responses** – The nervous system interprets grief as a threat, activating survival responses.

These reactions are normal and temporary. With time and support, your nervous system and emotions will begin to regulate.

How to Cope in the Early Days

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. What matters most is finding ways to support yourself moment by moment.

1. Recognizing and Supporting Your Nervous System

Grief activates stress responses in the body. Understanding this can help you find ways to regulate yourself.

- **Pause and acknowledge what you're feeling** – Naming your experience can help you feel more in control.
- **Grounding techniques** – Focus on physical sensations like the weight of your feet on the floor or a textured object in your hand.



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- **Breathing exercises** – Try deep belly breathing or "breathe your hand" (tracing fingers while inhaling/exhaling).
 - **Placing one or two hands on your chest while breathing slowly** – This can provide a sense of safety and help regulate your nervous system.
- **Weighted blankets or firm pressure** – Provides comfort and a sense of security.
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- **Ask for help** – Sometimes, regulation comes from connecting with others.

2. Prioritizing Safety and Basic Needs

Grief can make even basic tasks feel overwhelming. Focus on small steps:

- **Driving** – Have someone else drive, take public transit, or pause before starting the car to ground yourself. If you start crying, pull over until you feel safe to continue.
- **Eating** – Keep small, easy-to-grab snacks like nuts or yogurt nearby.
- **Drinking water** – Hydration helps combat emotional and physical exhaustion.
- **Sleep and rest** – Even short naps can help with exhaustion.
- **Daily hygiene** – Set reminders to shower, brush teeth, and change clothes.

3. Managing Emotional Dysregulation

Grief can make emotions feel unpredictable and extreme.

- **Crying** – Allow yourself to release emotions, and if you're afraid you won't stop, set a timer and plan to do something afterward. For example, once the timer goes off, move your body, call a friend, or do something that brings comfort.
- **Anger and frustration** – Instead of turning emotions inward, move your body (walk, stretch, hit a pillow).
- **Numbness** – This is the brain's way of protecting you. Trust that feelings will return in time.
- **Journal your thoughts** – Writing can help release and make sense of emotions.

4. Breaking Life into Small Moments

- Focus on **the next few moments** instead of the bigger picture.
- Break tasks into **tiny steps** (e.g., instead of "clean the house," aim for "put away one item").
- Follow a **loose routine** – Keeping mealtimes, sleep, and small daily habits can bring stability.



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5. Finding Comfort and Self-Soothing

Self-compassion is essential in grief. It's okay to be gentle with yourself and acknowledge that what you're feeling is valid. Treat yourself with the same kindness you would offer a grieving friend. Grief is exhausting. Small acts of care can help:

- **Grounding techniques** – Found above
- **Warm baths or showers** – Water can be grounding.
- **Soothing scents** – Lavender, vanilla, or familiar, comforting smells can help regulate emotions.
- **Petting an animal** – Physical connection can provide comfort.
- **Getting outside** – Even stepping outside for a breath of fresh air can help.
- **Music or gentle movement** – Play calming music or stretch your body.

6. Connecting with Support

- **Set boundaries with visitors** – If you're not up for visitors, place a note on your door that says, "Thank you for stopping by, but I'm not up for visitors today."
- **Ask for specific help** – If someone asks how they can help, give them a tangible task such as vacuuming, cutting the grass, or picking up groceries. People often want to help but don't know how.

You don't have to go through this alone.

- **Let people help you** – Give them specific tasks (e.g., "Can you bring me a meal?").
- **Talk to a trusted person** – Sharing thoughts with someone who listens without judgment can be healing.
- **Prepare for unhelpful comments** – Some people say things that feel dismissive or hurtful. It's okay to set boundaries.
- **Seek professional support** – A grief counsellor or therapist can offer guidance tailored to your needs.

Final Thoughts

Grief is deeply personal, and there is no "right" way to experience it. The early days can be the hardest, but you are not alone. Be gentle with yourself, take small steps, and reach out for support when needed. Over time, you will find ways to carry your loss and continue forward in a way that feels right for you.



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Creating Your Support Plan (place it somewhere you can see it)

Write down the people you can call when needed:

- **Daytime Support:** [Name & Phone #]
- **Anytime Support:** [Name & Phone #]

List things that help you feel calm or grounded:

- [Your favourite soothing activity]
- [A song or scent that helps you]
- [A place you feel safe]
- Additional
- Additional

Resources for Help

If grief feels overwhelming, reach out to professional support:

- **Crisis Support (Talk Suicide Canada):** 1-833-456-4566 (24/7) or text 45645 (4pm-midnight ET)
- **988 Suicide & Crisis Helpline:** Call or text 988 for 24/7 support.
- **Emergency Support:** Call 911 or go to the nearest hospital.
- **Contact me (Patti Broadfoot, Inner Sojourn):**
 - Phone: 226-270-5028 (text or call)
 - Email: Patti@innersojourn.net
 - Website: www.innersojourn.net
 - More resources can be found here under "Resources" "Grief"