



Patient & Family Guide
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Grief: Coping with Challenges

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Grief: Coping with Challenges

The death of someone important to you brings many changes in your life. As you adjust and respond to these changes, you will face challenges. These could be about the death and how it happened, or about your grief and how you are coping. Please remember: **you are not alone**. There are people and supports to help you during this time.

Here are some practical suggestions about dealing with common challenges people face when they are grieving.

Making decisions

It can be hard to make decisions when you are grieving. This is especially true when someone close to you has died. You do not have them there to make plans, share decisions, and consider consequences with. Your memory, concentration, and perspective may be affected by grief, leaving you with little confidence.

If you can, do not make any major decisions until you are feeling better able to handle them. If you must make major decisions, talk with an objective (open-minded/neutral) professional.

The following guidelines will help you with making decisions:

- Identify the problem and your goal as clearly as possible.
- List a variety of solutions, as many as you can think of.
- List the advantages and disadvantages of each solution.
- Outline the steps you will need to take for each solution.
- Talk to an expert or trusted advisor who is objective.
- Review all of the information you gathered, looking for anything you missed.
- Make your choice.
- Follow through, step by step.

Financial affairs

Settling the estate can be complex and exhausting. 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.

Be cautious and take your time with all financial decisions, following these suggestions:

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

Personal effects

Dealing with the personal belongings (effects) of the person who died can be very emotional. You may want to put it off because you do not have the energy, are not up to the decisions, or are comforted by their familiar presence. There is no specific time when this must be done, so do it when you feel ready. Doing it a bit at a time may help to 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 needed.

Memories of recent events

Especially in the early days of grief, you may find that you often think about the circumstances of the person's death. Repeated thoughts about how the person looked or acted, the care given, what you and others did or did not do, or how you heard the news are all common and natural. Repeating our thoughts seems to help us come to terms with hard or stressful times. Although these memories of recent events are common now, memories of other times will return. The following strategies may help:

- 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 or places

There may be certain rooms or places that you wish to avoid, as they remind you of the death or the person who died. If your discomfort is intense (very strong) and is getting in the way of your day-to-day life, you may wish to seek counselling.

The following strategies may also help:

- **At home:** Sleep or eat somewhere else for a while, or rearrange the furniture.
- **Away from home:** If you need to go somewhere you are not comfortable, ask someone to go with you or meet you there for support.

Changes in relationships

You may notice or feel like 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 also may have changed. You may not have as much energy for or interest in social activities. Loneliness and longing may affect your comfort in social situations. Some suggestions for finding support are:

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

Special dates and events

The calendar is full of reminders of the person who died. Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, and other special dates 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 help. Let yourself do things differently:

- 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 (like working on a memorial album or journal).

Dreams and visitations

People can have dreams about the person who died, or hear, see, or feel their presence. Often this is comforting, but sometimes it is not.

Although grief experts say that most grieving people have these experiences, some people long for a sense of presence and do not have it.

It may help to:

- 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, as well as your general health, may change. Fluctuations (ups and downs) in energy are often part of grieving. Grief raises your risk for illness due to stress, fatigue (tiredness), poor nutrition, indifference, etc. It is also likely that you may be tempted to slip into old patterns of coping, some of which may be harmful to your health. It is important to look after your physical wellbeing, as this can influence emotional healing after a loss. The following points are important to remember:

- Have regular checkups and contact your health care provider about any problems.
- This might be a time when you are tempted to use alcohol or drugs to escape the pain of your grief. The use of alcohol and other drugs can affect your natural grieving process.
- Low energy is normal — pace your activities and responsibilities.
- Regular exercise is important.

Sleep

Many grieving 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 include:

- Let yourself sleep differently for a while.
- Hot milk or herbal tea may help you get to sleep.
- Avoid stimulation (like alcohol, coffee, TV, exercise) before 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.
- Do not force sleep — try counting sheep, remember a pleasant time in every detail, plan a trip or renovation, or plot a novel.
- If you are not able to fall asleep or get back to sleep after 30 minutes, get up and do something pleasant and relaxing for a short time.

Eating

Your appetite and eating patterns are likely to change for a while; you may have no appetite or feel hungry all the time. Mealtimes can be hard reminders of your loss. Planning nutritious meals, grocery shopping, and preparing meals may be new skills for you and may be things that highlight your loss. Here are some suggestions for dealing with mealtimes and nutrition:

- If eating alone is hard, change where you eat or sit at the table, accept invitations to meals, or have people in for take-out.
- Try to eat regular healthy meals. Avoid snacking on junk food.
- Use ready-made nutritious meals from the freezer or deli section and stock up on healthy snacks.
- Consider regular dinner/lunch dates with family or friends (like the first Thursday of each month or every Monday).
- Recreational and seniors' centres often have cooking classes, sharing kitchens, etc. that you may enjoy.

