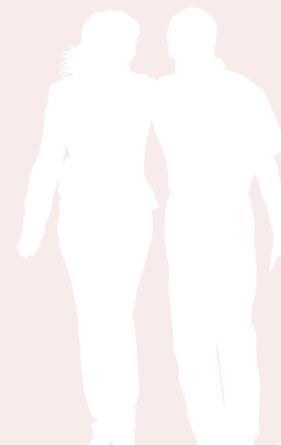




## Exploring **GRIEF** and **BEREAVEMENT**

### WHAT IS GRIEF?

Grief is a universal human experience, it is something that impacts everyone. Yet despite this fact, grief is also widely misunderstood and stigmatized. People often talk about feeling misunderstood, judged or isolated in their grief. Better understanding grief and exploring the impact of the loss (or losses) is an important part of beginning the healing process, finding meaning, and moving forward.



First, let's demystify grief. In the words of Dr. Kenneth Doka, "Grief is a reaction to loss. We often confuse it as a reaction to death. It's really just a very natural reaction to loss. When we lose any significant form of attachment, grief is the process of adjusting." Bereavement is the grief after someone we love dies and Mourning is the expression of that grief.

Many non-death losses often go unnamed or unacknowledged following a diagnosis of cancer, meaning the grieving person and family can carry that loss, without recognition of their grief, often in isolation. The weight of grieving a non-death loss, or a death-related loss is important as unacknowledged losses can feel immense. When we lose any significant form of attachment, grieving is the process of adjusting.

Think about what grief means for you, and for the people you love. When we lose any significant form of attachment, grief and grieving is the process of adjusting.



## What is grieving?

Grieving is an important part of healing after a loss. While you may be asked if you are "back to normal" or have "moved on". Grief impacts every part of our lives, and when we make space to honour our loss (or losses) we may find ways to move forward (not, move on). It is also important to consider the words of Dr. Earl Grollman, reminding us that "grief is not a disorder, a disease or sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve."

Have you noticed how grief may have impacted you physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, or practically? How can you acknowledge and honour your loss (or losses) and consider how you care for yourself as you are grieving?

## Are there different types of grief?

Yes. Though loss and grief are experienced by everyone at some point in their lives (some people more than others), there are actually many different types of loss and many different ways to grieve those losses.

### Non-death losses

When someone has been diagnosed with cancer, many non-death losses can occur throughout the illness. These can include loss of job, or self-identity, body image or fertility, social supports or finances (to name a few). It is important to honour and acknowledge the impact of these non-death losses, as non-death losses are often not talked about. Many people feel the weight of the loss (or losses), but don't understand the weight they may be feeling is actually the grief of those losses.

Can you recall any non-death losses throughout your loved one's experience with cancer? Were those losses named, or supported while they were alive? If not, what can you do to acknowledge and honour those losses now?

### Cumulative grief

Secondary losses are relating to, and following, the initial loss. When someone you love dies, there are a number of secondary losses you will also experience. These losses may be temporary, or permanent. The secondary losses can have physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and practical implications. The losses, like a ripple flowing outward, will impact each person in a unique way - these can include losses of identity, rituals or beliefs, financial, social or a range of other practical losses.

While many people think only about the death of a person, the impact of the death (secondary losses) is often unacknowledged or even, unsupported. Consider what secondary losses you may have experienced? What might be helpful or supportive for these secondary losses?

Some people may experience a single loss, while others may experience many losses. When someone experiences many losses, they experience cumulative grief. The impact of cumulative grief can occur over time or in short succession. Secondary losses are also a part of cumulative loss.

### Disenfranchised grief

Disenfranchised grief occurs when the grief experience is not seen as valid, or the grief is not acknowledged by others. This can happen when the relationship with the person who died is not viewed by others as valued, or the way someone died is stigmatized. This can have an impact on the grieving person as they may feel further isolated in their grief when others do not view their loss as valid.

Often people are grieving multiple losses without support, or acknowledgement. Individuals and families often face grief and loss in isolation, feeling they are "not coping" but not knowing why. Consider what the grief experience is like for you.

## When does grieving end?

Though commonalities exist, grief experiences, and responses to loss are unique for each person. It is important to remember that grief, and grieving, is going to look and feel different for everyone. It is also helpful to know that just as there are different types of loss, there are also different ways to grieve those losses. While many people think there are defined stages to move through in an orderly fashion, grief is in fact an unpredictable process and can bring up many different thoughts and feelings at unexpected times. It is important to know that grieving is a process. It is perfectly normal for the grieving person to move back and forth between actively grieving, then integrating (or reintegrating) the losses, then moving forward again, and again.

The term closure is often used by many people and refers to fixing grief and moving on. There is no real closure in grief. The idea of closure actually puts a lot of pressure on the grieving person to move on. While many people may want to fix grief, and put a time limit on the experience, it is perfectly normal to grieve the loss of someone or something for the rest of your life. The way you grieve will change over time, but it is normal to continue to honour your connection (also known as continuing bonds).

## What influences grief?

Remember, grief and grieving is unique for everyone. This is based on a number of factors, including:

- Age and stage in life cycle
- Illness history
- Loss history
- Trauma history
- Coping style and personality
- Cultural values and influences
- Spirituality and/or religious community
- Presence/absence of support network
- Additional stressors (caregiving, financial concerns, etc.)

While these factors influence our responses to loss, it is true that these factors are only part of the equation influencing our responses. Grief and grieving still looks unique for each one of us. Meaning that two people sharing the same culture or religious beliefs, although sharing a connection, will still respond in a unique way to loss as there are so many individual factors to consider.

It is important to know that even though family members may share many of the same characteristics, and can be grieving the same loss, that grief will still be unique for each person. Awareness of these unique needs and grieving styles can help to lessen tension for grieving families. Conflict can often happen in families when someone doesn't feel supported in grief. It is important to acknowledge what is helpful for you, and honour that need. It is also important to recognize that what may be helpful for you, may not be helpful for someone else.

It is important to know that some people will want to sit down and talk about their loss, finding emotional or spiritual outlets. Others will instead want to find ways to move through grief and seek mental or physical outlets to process their experiences. It is the difference between being and doing. Like being right-handed, or left-handed, the way we respond to grief is going to look and feel different.

**Does it help to talk to someone one-to-one and share the range of emotions or explore spiritual meaning-making and the impact of your grief, or do you feel supported through physical movement (walking, yoga, dance, working out, fixing or building something), or mental outlets (reading the stories of others, or listening to a podcast)? This is a continuum, meaning it can be one, or both approaches.**

## Are there good days and bad days in grief?

The ways we metabolize loss and grief are part of a process. Dr. Therese A. Rando highlighted an important concept in grieving: a subsequent temporary upsurge of grief. This names the brief increase in grief after you lose someone or something - known as a STUG (think of it as a grief burst).

Did you know there are different types of STUGs (or grief bursts)? Some grief bursts you might expect and try to prepare for, while others you might not expect and might feel unprepared for.

- Cyclic - occur throughout the year (birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, etc.)
- Linear - milestones (graduation, wedding, birth of child, retirement, etc.)
- Stimulus-related - something that stimulates the senses (scent, sight, etc.)

**STUGs (or grief bursts) are a normal, but not easy, part of grieving. Caring for yourself whenever you have a STUG is an important part of grieving and healing. Can you think of some examples of a STUG (or grief burst)? How can you care for yourself when you have a grief burst?**

## How can I move forward in grief?

Being gentle, compassionate and non-judgmental as you move forward in grief is important. Self-compassion is an important part of self-care. In the words of Vincent Van Gogh, "I am always doing what I cannot do yet in order to learn how to do it". Finding healing in grief means being vulnerable, facing uncertainty and gently (and without judgment) exploring ways to move forward.

**Boundaries are essential in self-care when you are grieving. Consider why boundaries are important for you? What are some healthy boundaries you can (re)establish to promote self-care and healing? What gives your life meaning? How can you honour this?**

Stories of others moving forward in grief are always an important part of healing.

Remember there is healing power in connection – to other people, or places, that nurture and support you as you grieve. You may find connections in nature, listening to the voices of others (in stories or podcasts), talking to others (either 1-1, or in a group), or physically moving your body or engaging your mind.

**Consider what is helpful in your grieving process. Remember there will be good moments, and tough moments. Having a "bad day" does not mean you are not grieving properly, it means that a range of thoughts and feelings will continue to surface (and resurface) as you grieve. Making time and space to honour your needs is an important part of grieving. Consider how you can honour your grief?**



## When should I seek more support?

If you are concerned about your health and safety, or the health and safety of someone you love, it is important to talk to a healthcare professional. If you find you, or a loved one, are in crisis and need support, you can call a local crisis hotline. You can call and have a confidential discussion about your worries or fears and discuss a plan to offer support.

## Where can I find support?

There are many free grief resources where you can share, and learn from others in the grieving process.

- You can ask a healthcare provider or a contact a local funeral home for a referral to bereavement resources in your area.
- You can contact us to speak with a Community Service Manager in your area to learn more about local resources.

There are also free online resources dedicated to supporting grieving people. Some of these include:

### My Grief

Because losing someone is hard, MyGrief.ca is a free, online resource that helps to understand and work through your grief. It is confidential and you can access My Grief in the privacy of your own home.

<https://mygrief.ca/>

### Kids Grief

Kids Grief is a free online resource that helps parents and caregivers support their children when someone in their life is dying or has died. It equips parents and caregivers with the words and confidence needed to help children grieve life's losses in healthy ways.

<https://kidsgrief.ca/>

### Living My Culture

At LivingMyCulture.ca, people from various cultures share their stories and wisdom about living with serious illness, end of life and grief to support others.

<https://livingmyculture.ca/culture/>

### Actively Moving Forward®

AMF is a network created in response to the needs of grieving young adults. For over a decade, we have connected, supported and empowered grieving young adults to “actively move forward” in memory of their person. These young adults support one another and are encouraged to actively move forward in memory of their person.

<https://healgrief.org/actively-moving-forward/>

### What's Your Grief

Free website and podcast. You don't have to grieve alone. What's Your Grief is a place for sharing, support, resources, and more.

<https://whatsyourgrief.com/>





## What does healing look like?

Pema Chödrön talks about the process of healing, saying, “We think that the point is to pass the test or overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don’t really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It’s just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.”

Remember that grieving is a process that impacts us physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and practically. Consider what is supportive for you, and for those you love. It may feel and look very different and that is perfectly normal. How can you find ways to honour your grief?

In the words of Dr. Earl Grollman, grief is not a disorder, a disease or sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve.

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