

## **The Physical and Emotional Effects of Grief**

**By Brook Noel**

**[www.griefsteps.com](http://www.griefsteps.com)**

The loss of someone close to us can quickly turn our world into an unfamiliar place. Coping with what used to be routine becomes exhausting. The simplest task may seem daunting. Grief affects us not only emotionally, but also physically.

When we can understand how grief affects us, we are better equipped to deal with its grip. While we wish we never had to learn or understand these emotions, being aware of them may offer us comfort in our own times of sorrow.

A common feeling of people dealing with loss, is the feeling of going crazy. The emotions are so strong and intense; those grieving often think they are the only ones to feel that way or that their feelings are wrong. You're not crazy, and you're not alone. By understanding these emotions, we take the first step toward realization and thus our first step on the pathway of healing.

In her book, *A Journey Through Grief: Gentle, Specific Help to Get You Through The Most Difficult Stages of Grief*, Alla René Bozarth, Ph.D. writes, "While you are grieving, your emotional life may be unpredictable and unstable. You may feel that there are gaps in your remembered experience.... You may alternate between depression and euphoria, between wailing rage and passive resignation.... If you've experienced loss and are hurting, it's reasonable that your responses will be unreasonable."

In this article, we examine the levels on which grief affects us. Some grieverers report feeling many of these pains early on, while others report experiencing them later and still some report few of these experiences. Your relationship to the loved one will make your individual dance with grief different.

### **Exhaustion**

Perhaps the most commonly reported symptom of grief is utter exhaustion and confusion. In her book, *Surviving Grief*, Dr. Catherine M. Sanders explains "we become so weak that we actually feel like we have the flu. Because of our lack of experience with energy depletion, this weakness frightens and perplexes us. Before the loss, it happened only when we were sick."

Little things we used to do without thinking, like mailing a letter, can easily become an all day task. Getting a gallon of milk can seem monumental. The thought of getting dressed, driving a car, getting money, paying a cashier, carrying the gallon, driving home-just these thoughts alone, can leave a griever hungry for sleep.

There are many remedies for exhaustion. People may prescribe vitamin combinations, exercise, eating well, staying busy and more. You are in recovery. Give yourself some time to grieve and let the emotions work through you. If you jump to stay busy now, or

sidetrack part of the grieving process, it will only resurface down the road. It's all right to be exhausted and to rest. Take your time to heal.

### **Days of Distraction**

Most people function well in their daily lives. We know how to get things done, stay organized and accomplish what we set out to do. After experiencing a death, it's like we lose the most basic of skills. Those things that we once did with ease become difficult and challenging. These moments of distraction are signals from your body that you must slow down. No matter how small the task, it is too much for you right now. Be careful not to overburden yourself. Lower your expectations. Know that you will be able to function like you once did-but it takes time-it takes recovery.

### **Grief Knows No Schedule**

In today's world we have grown accustomed to scheduling so much of life. Most of us own at least one organizer or appointment book. Yet grief is one thing that will never fit in an appointment square. You may find there are times when you are in the midst of a normal, pleasant activity and suddenly a wash of grief comes over you. Know that this is common and that grief can surface at any time, without notice.

There is so little of life we control. Grief's timing is among the uncontrollable. Expect experiences, similar to these, frequently over the first three to six months (the frequency is often based on how close you were to the deceased). Over the course of a year, they will lessen, but they may still happen from time to time.

### **Physical Symptoms**

When grief covers us with its dark wings, it is much like a serious illness. We will be emotionally and physically depleted and a variety of symptoms will follow. It is important to be aware of these symptoms; however, so we don't think we are going crazy. These symptoms will pass as we work through our grief. If you find any symptom to be overwhelming or unbearable, contact a professional. Here are some of the commonly reported symptoms:

- Pain
- Sleep difficulties
- Poor appetite or overeating
- Shakiness or trembling
- Listlessness
- Disorientation
- Migraines or headaches
- Dizziness
- Dry mouth
- Crying
- Numbness
- Shortness of breath
- Exhaustion

### **A Time to Withdraw**

Many people will experience a state of numbness while moving through grief. The world may take on a dreamlike quality or seem to go on separate from them. Often experiences or people that once evoked joy and happiness evoke nothing at all. Activities once enjoyed seem foreign.

Some people spend a relatively short time in this numb state, as short as a few days, while others find it lingers. This is part of how our bodies help to protect us from the overwhelming emotions caused by our loved one's death. We become numb and filter through information as we are able, instead of all at once. The feelings will come back, but it will take time.

Hand-in-hand with exhaustion, performing our day-to-day activities, even if they are ones we used to enjoy, may seem overwhelming. Most people are not able to maintain a variety of interests immediately after this shock. Do not make expectations for yourself to do everything. Instead, look at your commitments and try to minimize. Contact event or group coordinators to let them know that you will be taking some time off, indefinitely.

### **Impulsive Living**

While some grievors withdraw, others will compulsively pursue activities. The thought process often goes like this, "Life is short. I'd better do everything now that I always wanted to do...spend all the money, sell the house and move to Hawaii, write that book, divorce my wife, etc." Others will take unnecessary risks.

It's imperative to carefully monitor your behavior during the first year. Do not make impulsive decisions. Do not sell your house, change locations, divorce a partner, etc. Wait until the fog has lifted and you can clearly see the options available to you.

### **The World Becomes Dreamlike**

Many people who have lost someone suddenly, find the world becomes a surreal place. It's almost as if we are floating without seeing or comprehending. Everything becomes a blur as the concept of time disappears.

Days are measured by: one day after he died, two days after he died...all standard concepts fade away. Some have described it as slogging through molasses, a slow motion movie, a feeling like they are not in their body. Perhaps this is nature's way of slowing us down to heal.

Helen Fitzgerald, author of *The Mourning Handbook* writes, "During this initial period of grief, you will feel a numbness and a disassociation with the world around you. People who are going through this often tell me that they feel as if they are watching a play in which they are but spectators.

Others feel that what has happened is only a bad dream from which they will wake up to find everything back to normal." Know that this is part of the body coping with tragic loss. Our bodies and minds know better than to dump us back into reality after such an

intense blow. Therefore we are nudged slowly, step-by-step, back into day-to-day life. Much of the world will remain out of focus, allowing us to gather our bearings one step at a time.