



# Grief & Loss - Reactions and Ways to Cope

## Grief Reactions

## Coping Ideas

### SHOCK

Feeling Temporarily stunned; in a trance; tending to let others make decisions. Characterized by disorientation and confusion that can last for minutes, hours, days or even longer

Shock will resolve naturally as reality sets in. Things that help: seeing the body of the deceased, participating in rituals like funerals and memorials. These things help the loss become more 'real'.

### DENIAL

An emotional place where strength can be gathered to face what lies ahead. Characterized by disbelief in what has happened, minimizing the impact, refusing to discuss the events and avoidance of thinking about the loss. **Caution:** Sometimes people can get 'stuck' in denial because changing forces an admission of the loss and its significance

Talk over fears and concerns with a trusted friend or counsellor. Confront and deal with issues that must be faced. Think positively about yourself and your ability to cope. Find new ways to ease tension and fear, even if you do not feel they relate directly to your situation. Participating in rituals, like the funeral, can help make the loss 'real' and denial will subside.

### FEAR

Can range from minor annoyance to full blown panic. Characterized by dread of the future; negative interpretations of everything that happens and lack of awareness of anything positive. Also, fear of facing reality, speculation on 'what if', preoccupation with bodily sensations and even preoccupation with death.

Focus on positive things. View the slightest progress as moving in the right direction. Record improvements. Tell yourself affirming things. Talk to a good listener. Investigate - try not to worry about things that will never happen. Find humour or create it. Practice deep breathing when feelings of fear or panic come on.

### HELPLESSNESS

Feelings of being pushed along where you do not wish to go; being out of control. Characterized by mood swings, including panic, depression and defeat; loss of belief in your personal power. **Caution:** Family and friends may end up taking over too many tasks for too long.

Make a list of things you are able to do. Allow others to help you with things you cannot cope with. Be aware that helplessness is a state of mind. Avoid people who want to smother you. Seek out sources of courage and strength. Give yourself credit for small steps. Use humour. As soon as possible, get into some sense of routine.

### ANGER

Desire to blame someone; a downward spiral that uses a lot of energy; internal simmering; irritability; bitterness. Characterized by reliving the situation that generated the anger; verbally attacking people over insignificant issues; blocking out positive feelings; and actively fighting opportunities for joy. **Caution:** Suppressing anger can make you feel like you are going crazy. Unhealthy outbursts of anger that hurt others or yourself are not helpful.

Talk with someone who can be trusted to keep conversations confidential. A professional counsellor can serve this purpose. Ask yourself if being angry is helping. If it isn't, try to replace your feelings of anger with more positive thoughts and feelings. Practice healthy ways of releasing anger - physical activity, relaxation techniques, build or create something, clean the house, etc. Use your anger as fuel to spur these positive activities. The goal is to channel your feelings of anger and negative energy into something productive.

### LONELINESS/ EMPTINESS

This is a very common feeling among grieving people. Characterized by a deep yearning for the lost loved one and a sense that part of yourself is missing.

Time will help to heal this wound. Be with others and invest in new relationships. Share memories of your lost loved one with others.

## APATHY

Faded interest in life, resulting from facing something that seems totally negative and overwhelming. Characterized by disconnecting from your situation and normal activities; telling yourself “I don’t care” or “There’s no use” or “There’s nothing I can do about it anyway”; snapping at others who try to help. **Caution:** This may *seem* like an easier way out than sorting through or expressing complex feelings and thoughts.

Open yourself to feeling that have been buried. Build a supportive environment. Think about those who care about you. Closing them out hurts you both. Reward yourself for taking small steps towards your goal. Crying is better than avoidance. Be aware that what you gain from this state, such as avoiding making difficult decisions, and also think about what you might lose. Seek more positive ways to deal with things.

## GUILT

Regret for ‘doing’ or ‘not doing’ something while the loved one was still alive. It can be part of a healthy drive to understand and gain some control over the situation. Can even be experienced as being a burden to others. Characterized by doing things that risk injury; avoiding telling others about needs, which also deprives them of the opportunity to offer help; inventing reasons to avoid people so you don’t make them sad, too; thinking about the difficulty your situation is causing others; refusing to accept that others care; scanning events of the past and dwelling on past mistakes. **Caution:** Extreme forms of guilt may affect health, lower self-esteem and inflict overly harsh mental punishment.

Remind yourself of all the things you did do to help your loved one in the past. Focus on your positive accomplishments, even in this regrettable situation of loss. Reach out to others. Let people know what you need without being demanding. Talk over your feelings of guilt with others to gain their perspective on the situation. Let others help round out a positive picture of yourself.

## DEPRESSION/ DESPAIR

Powerful down currents that can colour other feelings. An emotional paralysis more pervasive than sadness. Characterized by lack of motivation to do even simple tasks; frequent crying spells over an extended period of time; feelings of abandonment; thinking “What’s the use?”; dwelling on the past because the future looks bleak or like it’s getting worse. **Caution:** Despair can grow slowly out of depression and lead to diminishing quality of life through neglect of personal hygiene and appearance; deliberate blocking of positive feelings and supportive people, which robs you of remedies. Depression and despair can lead to feelings of hopelessness and suicidal thoughts.

Focus on what you still have and what you have gained. Keep active and involved with positive people. Ask others how they have coped. Allow yourself to ‘give in’ to your grief occasionally, but seek professional help if your depression lasts too long or if it begins to seriously affect your daily life.

**Seek professional help from a hospital, doctor, mental health facility, crisis centre or private counsellor if you have any thoughts of hurting yourself or others.**



PEACE REGIONAL  
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Bag 900, 9200 – 99 Street, Peace River, Alberta, T8S  
2A4 Bus: 780.624.6626 Fax: 780.624.6650

## GRIEF & LOSS

### Reactions and Ways to Cope

Grieving takes energy - that's why we feel exhausted (physically, emotionally, and spiritually). Grief affects our thoughts and feelings and we react with our entire body. The following tips may seem simple but often we forget that sometimes the simple steps are the steps of healing.

1. **Eat** - Even though you might not be hungry, your body is like a vehicle - it doesn't get very far without "fuel". Try to eat smaller or lighter snacks. Try soup and a bun. Try to keep to regular eating schedules even if you don't feel like it.
2. **Rest** - You are exhausted! You need to get rest. Sleep will help you rest your mind and body. Even if you're not sleeping all through the night try to keep to regular bedtimes and sleep while you can. It's okay to have a nap in the afternoon. Your body will process your thoughts and emotions while you sleep. Try lying down even in a room for "quiet time" even if you think you won't sleep. Watch your caffeine intake - this interferes with sleep (think colas; chocolate, coffee).
3. **Water** - We often feel like our body is a desert and our mouth is dry all the time. This is because we are dehydrated. If we have been crying we need to replenish those tears with water. Even if we haven't been crying, our body has been using water resources for energy. DRINK LOTS OF WATER!!!!
4. **Cry** - It's okay to cry tears of sadness, anger, rage, frustration, despair over the loss of a loved one. It's okay for both men and women to cry. It's okay to cry in public or by ourselves. The important thing to remember is that it is not a weakness to cry. It is our body's way of releasing emotions and tensions that perhaps we have no words for.
5. **Laugh** - It's okay to laugh about good times and reminisce. It's doesn't make us "bad people" for sharing a laugh even at a time of sadness. Sometimes we need a "break" from being sad.
6. **Exercise** - Physical activity is a really good way to express emotions that build up inside - anger, rage, helplessness. Do something physical - workout, lift weights, go for a walk, chop wood, clean the house - anything that helps you channel these emotions in a healthy way. It will also help with relaxing and sleep.
7. **Talk** - Talk with others who are supportive. Reminisce and share good times with friends and family. Talk about tough feelings and decisions you are facing. You can also talk to a pet - they don't judge and they never tell you what to do!
8. **Different for Everyone** - Each of us is unique and so we have our own ways of coping and healing. Our timeframes may be different. Be patient with those around you.
9. **Reach out to others** - Know when you or someone you know isn't coping well. Don't be afraid to ask for professional help. A good portion of people in counselling are there for grief related issues (loss through death, separation, breakup, employment, health) so you don't have to be "crazy" to seek professional mental health help. It takes a strong person to know when they need extra help.
10. **Find hope in small things** - "Cry when you need to, laugh when you can." Know that you won't always feel as you do now. There will be a time when you can laugh again and feel joy.