



# Understanding Grief

## SU Wellness Centre

**Grief is a natural response** to losing something or someone important to you. When we are grieving, we can experience a wide variety of reactions.

**Cognitive and psychological responses** may involve a sense of being out of control due to the intensity of emotions, physical responses and thoughts.

- Disbelief
- Bewilderment
- Impaired concentration
- Preoccupation with the loss
- Sense of the deceased's presence
- Decreased trust
- Lowered self-esteem
- Increased self-consciousness
- Memory problems
- Difficulty making decisions

**Spiritual responses** may include:

- Exploration of life's meaning and purpose
- Spiritual confusion
- Spiritual estrangement
- Strengthened or renewed spirituality
- Continued connections with the deceased through recollection of memories or feeling their presence

**Behavioural and social responses** may include:

- Social withdrawal or isolation
- Crying
- Hypo-sexuality (reduced sexual interest) or hyper-sexuality (increased sexual interest)

**Physical responses** may include:

- Fatigue
- Decreased motivation
- Restlessness
- Physical exhaustion
- Lack of energy
- Headaches
- Digestive upset
- Weight and appetite change
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Insomnia
- Somatic disturbances

**Emotional responses** may include intense and conflicting emotions. These feelings can be experienced as unlike anything else you have felt before.

- Shock and/or numbness
- Denial
- Sadness
- Anger
- Guilt
- Confusion
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Loneliness
- Yearning
- Helplessness
- Irritability
- Depression
- Despair
- Relief
- Increased sense of mortality, fear for yourself and of losing others

**Grief has no specific time frame.** People who are grieving say grief will last as long as it lasts. The time frame can be different for each person and each situation. Some factors that might affect grieving include your coping style, cultural background, spiritual or religious beliefs, support system, personality and the unique relationship that has changed due to the loss.

**Sudden or shocking losses** can be traumatic. Sudden losses can challenge your sense of security and confidence in the predictability of life. You may experience symptoms such as sleep disturbance, nightmares, distressing thoughts, depressed mood, social isolation or severe anxiety. You may feel vulnerable, jumpy or nervous and you may experience reoccurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks. These responses are normal and should decrease with time. If they don't decrease, professional support may be beneficial.

### Coping with Grief

When faced with loss, there are ways you can help yourself begin to re-orient to life around you. Although life will never be the way it was prior to the loss, it won't always feel as strange as it does in the moment. Each one of us has an individual style of coping with painful experiences. It's helpful to maintain your routines, in balance with giving yourself permission to support your needs.

To help you determine what might be most helpful for you, ask yourself questions such as:

- "How have I dealt with extreme challenges in the past? What did I do then that might help in this situation?"
- "What can I do now (e.g. exercise, eat healthy food, take time to relax) that might help me feel some control in the present moment?"
- "Who is available to me for support? Who do I want to spend time with to get the support I need?"

### Supporting Each Other

Here are some ways you can help a friend who is grieving:

- Ask about their experience.
- Ask "what can I do for you?" They may need you to listen, or to call or text. It's important for them to know you care.
- Be a good listener. Don't worry that bringing up their loss will upset them. They're likely thinking about it and inviting them to talk can help.
- Share stories about the person who died.
- Spend time together, but allow for time apart as some people need more space than others.
- Share your thoughts, feelings or stories about what helped you in times of loss.
- Acknowledge the pain and sadness of the situation.
- Don't dismiss grief. If you feel they might benefit from professional support, give them information to help them access support on or off-campus.

### Professional Resources for Ongoing Support

On Campus:

SU Wellness Centre, (MSC 370)  
[ucalgary.ca/wellnesscentre](http://ucalgary.ca/wellnesscentre)  
403.210.9355

Staff Wellness (Math Sciences, 2nd Floor)  
[ucalgary.ca/staffwellness](http://ucalgary.ca/staffwellness)  
403.220.2918

Off Campus:

Alberta Health Services  
• Grief Support Program  
[albertahealthservices.ca](http://albertahealthservices.ca)

Canadian Mental Health Association  
• General grief and suicide support  
[cmha.calgary.ab.ca](http://cmha.calgary.ab.ca)