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HOW THE MIND AND BODY ARE AFFECTED BY GRIEF

Grief can cause changes in your heart, immune system and sleep patterns. But support is available...



Far from just sadness, grief can cause physical and mental changes and symptoms. But support is available to help you cope during this time. Understanding how grief may affect you and observing changes in your body may help you manage your grief.

For many, the symptoms will go away as you process your grief, but the grieving process looks different for everyone.

Experiencing loss can be difficult, but you're not alone. There's no amount of time that is right or wrong for you to cope with a loss.

HOW GRIEF AFFECTS THE BODY

■ Heart Issues

A [2022 review](#) indicates that intense grief may trigger the acute onset of a heart attack. Your chances of a heart attack may

increase for those who experience cardiovascular issues.

[Research](#) suggests that stress from grief can cause changes within the cardiovascular system. Blood pressure and pulse rates tend to increase, which triggers blood to thicken and their stress level to rise.

This phenomenon isn't just limited to losing a loved one but can occur whenever a person feels grief.

Some of these changes may be responsible for [broken heart syndrome](#). Broken heart syndrome can also be called stress-induced cardiomyopathy or takotsubo cardiomyopathy.

People experience broken heart syndrome due to a surge of stress hormones that cause chest pain and heart rhythm changes similar to what you'd see in a heart attack. It can lead to short-term heart muscle failure.



Over forty years of research and studies have shown there is a link between grief and responses in the mind and body.

- chronic grief
- [panic disorders](#)
- inhibited or [delayed grief](#)

You may also experience feelings such as:

- anger and guilt
- shock and denial
- yearning
- helplessness and sadness

Many of these feelings get lumped into the five stages of grief, which provides a basic guide or reference to what you might go through during a loss.

■ Impaired immune system

Grief can negatively impact your body's ability to heal and fight infections. Over [40 years](#) of research studies have shown a link between grief and:

- heightened inflammatory response
- lowered antibody response to vaccination
- changes in autoimmune response and sensitivity

They also noted that the likely development of depression could alter the immune system response.

■ Sleep Issues

When you grieve the passing of a loved one or another major loss, it may negatively affect your sleep. According to a [2020 study](#), complicated grief, known as [prolonged grief disorder](#), can cause sleep disturbances.

Findings also indicate that prolonged grief disorder can affect the quality of your sleep at higher rates than [post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#) and [depression](#).

You are not alone. Consider speaking with a mental health professional to support you in regulating your sleep patterns.

■ Other physical changes

Everyone responds to grief differently, in how they process their emotions and how their body responds to the loss. Some physical changes you may notice include:

- nausea or vomiting
- tight, heavy feeling in the throat or chest
- numbness, loss of sensation in the muscles
- headaches, dizziness and fatigue

■ Other psychiatric issues

Grief can lead to developing several distinctive psychological conditions. Some potential conditions you may experience include:

- [anxiety](#)
- post-traumatic stress

■ Changes in thoughts

When you go through grief, you will most likely experience changes in how you think, remember and process information. Changes to thoughts you might undergo may include:

- disbelief
- preoccupation and concentration issues
- confusion
- [hallucinations](#)

GRIEF AND STRESS

Researchers have [noted](#) that losing a loved one is the greatest stressor you may experience. You can experience grief related to the loss and new stressors related to your changing role and taking on new responsibilities.

[Studies](#) that look at the effects of social support for people who suffered a sudden or violent loss of a loved one showed any loss of a loved one could lead to stress. When the loss is the result of violence or if it is sudden and unexpected, you may experience even more stress.

Grief related to other losses can also cause stress. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), major



changes to daily life can trigger or cause grief, which can then cause distress.

Stress, no matter the cause, affects physical and mental health. The American Heart Association links chronic stress to:

- heart disease and stroke
- changes in appetite
- decreased fertility
- sleep problems
- upset stomach
- depression
- anxiety disorders

Depression and grief

Depression and grief share several symptoms and signs.

In most cases, when you grieve, you will experience symptoms similar to depression, such as:

- fatigue
- changes in sleep
- switching usual routines or tendencies
- loss of interest in enjoyable activities
- trouble concentrating

You might find it hard to figure out the difference between grief and depression in yourself or others. Some things to consider to help you determine if your grief has turned to depression include:

- no longer can feel pleasure
- noticeable impairment in functioning
- continued isolation from others
- unable to cope with the pain
- thoughts of suicide and not related to reuniting with a loved one

If you suspect you or a loved one is experiencing depression, you might consider talking with a doctor or reaching out to friends and loved ones. Depression often requires some form of treatment to feel better, and how you respond to it will be different compared to grief.

WHEN TO SEEK A PROFESSIONAL

Everyone grieves a loss in their own way and in their own time.

Even if you don't seek professional healthcare, you might find that reaching out to a support network helps. This doesn't mean you need to talk or process your feelings with someone. A strong support network can help you:

- take care of everyday tasks, like meals or errands
- listen when you need to talk
- help look after the kids
- help getting final arrangements in place or other needs



If you need more support or want to talk with a professional, you might find that you can start at a trusted doctor's office and ask for a referral which could be a good starting point.

You could look for a bereavement counselor in your area. Bereavement counselors can help you process your grief and reduce stress levels. If you can not find a good bereavement counselor, most psychiatrists should be able to help.

If you feel like your grief is affecting your day-to-day life, you may consider seeking treatment, such as:

- cognitive behavior therapy
- talk therapy
- medication

NEXT STEPS

Grief can cause several changes in how you think and feel as well as physical sensations. The changes tend to be temporary and go away as you process your grief.

The changes you experience include impaired thinking, sadness, increased stress levels, and potentially heart-related issues, such as having a heart attack. You may also experience changes in how you sleep.

When you experience grief, having a strong support network can help. This can include family, friends, and professionals, such as grief counselors or psychiatrists.

If you or a loved one has experienced a grief-triggering loss, you can take one or more of these steps:

- allow yourself time to go through the grieving process
- learn more about what to expect with grief
- reach out to friends and family for emotional as well as other kinds of support
- find a professional to talk with for formal treatment
- learn about the many signs of depression and other psychological conditions