

Understanding Grief & Loss



ΔΥΝΑΜΙΣ ΔΕΧΟΜΕΝΟΙ ΣΕΒΑΣΜΟΝ
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What is Grief?

It is the normal and necessary journey we embark on after something we have valued no longer exists. It is the reaction to any heartfelt loss that impacts our lives. Grief can occur from a variety of losses, not just the loss of a loved one:

- If a beloved pet dies, we grieve.
- If someone we love leaves us, we grieve.
- If something we value is taken away from us, we grieve.
- If circumstances we were comfortable with or attached to change, we grieve.

Coping with grief depends on many factors, from personal beliefs to one's current stressors. Feelings associated with grief can be overwhelming, and getting through each day may be difficult. **There are no clear guidelines for the grief process.** Each person will resolve their grief in their own time and in their own way.

Grief has the potential to impact many areas of our life: personal identity, physical health, roles and responsibilities, social interactions, faith, work productivity, your sense of self, safety, connection, capacity, trust, purpose, meaning, and more. We grieve through both positive and negative major life transitions. It does not have a set time frame and can last for weeks, months, or years and triggers can present during holidays, anniversaries, and major life events. However, grief does tend to lessen in intensity over time.

What is the Difference Between Grief and Mourning?

If grief is what we think and feel inside, mourning is the outward expression of our grief. Mourning is crying, talking about the loss, journaling, sharing memories, and telling stories. Other ways to mourn include praying, making things, joining in ceremonies, and participating in support groups. Mourning is how, over time, we begin to heal. It is through active and honest mourning that we reconstruct hope and meaning.



Why Do We Grieve?

Grief, while unpleasant, actually serves a purpose. It promotes physiological, cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral reactions that help us adapt, survive, and learn post loss. We must learn new ways to function and exist without the expected or desired people.

Funerals are gatherings of supportive community after a loss which strengthens social ties and connection. Essentially, grief's purpose is to elicit mourning so that our brains can rewire while we receive support from others. This helps us move through the initial devastation of loss into a place where we can live with the loss in a meaningful way.



Variables That Can Impact Our Experience of Grief



- How connected you were to the person
- How healthy the relationship was with the deceased
- Whether you had unresolved issues in the relationship
- Whether the death was sudden or progressive
- The exact nature of the death (i.e., illness, accident, suicide)
- The age of the person who died
- The support system you have
- Number and type of previous deaths you have experienced
- What you have learned about death over your lifetime
- Your religious beliefs related to death
- Other stressors you are experiencing at the time of the death



Complicated Grief

The circumstances of a loss can have a major impact on grief. Deaths that are unexpected, traumatic, or stigmatized (e.g. suicide) **can complicate the grieving process**. Personal factors, such as a history of mental illness, or a strained relationship with the deceased, can also contribute to difficulties.

Complicated Grief occurs when the symptoms of acute grief don't go away. These symptoms, in complicated grief can last for years and the loss of a loved one can continue to feel unreal and unimaginable. You might continue to long for the deceased and experience guilt and difficulty moving forward. The trauma of sudden death can become a defining moment in a person's life and can change all the rules. It can cause someone to question their sense of self, others, faith and beliefs, as well as the world around them. People respond to traumatic events in their own way, according to their individual coping skills, past experiences, and personality.

Experiencing Sudden Death

Your reactions may be stronger if you saw your loved one's death or found them after they died. It is important to remember that you are not to blame for their choices. Try to get help and talk to others.

It is not unusual for some people to become depressed following a suicide, and may themselves experience thoughts of suicide. People often find it hard to think clearly and it is not unusual to feel sick, angry, and overcome by sadness, shame, guilty and embarrassed, or even numb or nothing at all. Frequently people have difficulty concentrating and sleeping, and may find themselves continually replaying what has happened over and over in their mind. Alternatively, sometimes people minimize the effect this event has had on them.

In the weeks, months or years following a death by suicide, some people may have nightmares and flashbacks, focus on the act of suicide itself, blame themselves and others, isolate themselves, and have no energy to do tasks. Family conflict may arise due to intense emotions and different ways of grieving. Even in the same family, people will grieve, react and cope differently.



What is Multiple Grief?

It's just what it sounds like: grieving multiple losses at one time. It's more common than you may think, so you're not alone. It can even result in grief overload. Multiple grief takes many forms:

- Multiple deaths of friends or family within a short period of time.
- Combination of a death in the family, ex: divorce or separation, job loss, accident, or chronic illness.
- Loss of a pet or your home.

When all or some of these events occur concurrently, it can seem hopeless, leaving you wondering how you will cope with it all. The resulting feelings of these varied types of losses put added pressure on families who are already grieving the death of a beloved family member etc.

Multiple grief is known as cumulative grief. When you have had a unique relationship with each person who has died, it's difficult to gather all your thoughts about each one and simply throw them in a box to be unpacked all at once. The grieving process doesn't work like that. You need to process each individual loss separately in order to come to terms with it. Many people succumb to substance use and abuse as they try to numb the pain.

Grief Overload

In Nunavut, often, there is limited time for people to grieve or recover from the loss of the previous death, before another death/loss occurs. Some people may not recognize that their healing journey from previous suicides has not started or completed. When someone we love dies, it is always difficult. But when we experience several significant losses within a relatively short period of time, we are at risk for loss overload which is very challenging for our body and can result in a number of symptoms due to the brain and body feeling overwhelmed.

An accumulation of losses, on top of already attempting to heal from generational and systemic trauma can certainly contribute to grief overload. Grief overload means that even if we have generally grieved and mourned in healthy ways and were always self-sufficient. The accumulation of losses makes it difficult to properly grieve and mourn at once.

Getting Support - Complicated Grief, Multiple Loss & Grief Overload

The death of someone precious is not to be resolved or fixed, but rather to be expressed, experienced, and gently, over time. The journey to find meaning takes time and so its important to be kind to yourself through this experience.

It is important to note that grief reactions due to multiple loss or from losing someone to suicide can be turbulent and unique in nature. Each person copes differently through these abnormal circumstances which can overwhelm anyone's capacity to cope. For awhile, nothing feels certain, and trying to re-establish order, meaning, and balance is all the more difficult when we try to do it alone. You might experience anxiety, panic, depression, and other symptoms that make it difficult for you to function daily.

If you feel like you may be suffering from grief overload, it is encouraged that you seek the support of an experienced and compassionate mental health counselor as they can provide you with the structure, guidance, and compassionate listening you need to survive this challenging time. In Nunavut, there is often a high turnover of mental health workers, which can make this healing difficult. Sometimes a virtual counselor may be a more helpful option as they can act as a consistent person to help you navigate your grief through the months and years to come.



Common Feelings, Reactions and Symptoms of Grief

It's important to note that all of these feelings, symptoms and reactions are normal and common when we experience a loss. Remind yourself that even if these changes are intense, you are not going "crazy" and **that they are appropriate under the circumstances**. The process of grieving often involves sadness, anger, loneliness, and other painful emotions. However, grieving can help you come to terms with loss and move forward in life, while still cherishing memories of your loved one.


Physical Reactions:

- Sleep cycles may change
- Digestive related responses: lack of appetite, nausea, increase in appetite, cravings for comfort food
- Headaches
- Neurological effects: headaches, dizziness, difficulty concentrating, poor memory
- Increases inflammation in the body
- Weakens immune system
- Raises blood pressure
- Body aches, pains, stiffness



Psychological/Cognitive Reactions:

- Confusion
- Memory problems
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irrational thinking
- Hyperactivity
- Sense of unreality
- Obsession with the decease
- Sense of loss of purpose
- Dreams or nightmares relating to the death
- The illusion of your loved one's presence



Grief increases the risk of developing other health problems, mental illness, and relationship difficulties. This is especially true if the death was traumatic, if you felt guilt about the death, or if the grief was prolonged.

Emotional Reactions:

- Anxiety
- Numbness
- Yearning
- Apathy
- Emptiness
- Resentment
- Helplessness
- Relief
- Shock
- Fear
- Disbelief
- Denial
- Sadness
- Anger
- Guilt

Spiritual Reactions:

- Anger at God
- Loss of faith
- Connection with nature/ sense of something larger than ourselves
- Greater connection with God or religion negotiating with God

Social Reactions:

- Loneliness
- Sense of detachment from others
- Feeling abandoned
- Need to be alone
- Easily irritated by others
- Loss of interest in daily social activities
- Not wanting to return to work or school



Common Misconceptions About Grief

All of us have received messages and information about death and dying, but unfortunately a lot of what we have learned isn't very helpful. Try to determine whether you have come to believe any of the following misinformation or myths regarding grieving, and begin to challenge these ideas.

Myth #1: Grief progresses in linear stages.

Reality: While it's sometimes true that we progress through stages as we grieve, this is not always the case. Grief is a unique process and is experienced as so.

Myth #2: There are "right" and "wrong" ways to grieve.

Reality: There are many, many different ways to grieve. Grief experiences vary, and there isn't a single right or wrong way to grieve. However, there is a difference between normal or common grief and atypical grief. Also, there are healthy and unhealthy ways to cope.

Myth #3: Time heals all wounds.

Reality: Grief is not bound by the parameters of time; it changes, but doesn't disappear. We adjust and carry on, but the grief (less raw now) remains as it becomes a part of us.

Myth #4: Everything happens for a reason.

Reality: This may be your personal belief, but it is not everyone's truth. Saying this to a person who is grieving, especially when the loss is senseless or particularly horrific, may undermine their grief.

Myth #5: "Don't cry, you need to be strong for [the deceased/your kids/mom, etc.]"

Reality: Not only do you not have to be "strong," the idea that mental "strength" is a measure of how well a person suppresses or ignores their emotions is false. If anything, it's more difficult to go through the process of grief and feel the pain. To share your suffering with another is to be human... and two humans together are stronger than one. Not allowing yourself to grieve is harmful, not strong.

Coping With Grief

Take Responsibility for Your Recovery:

It is essential that we take responsibility for our feelings, including the pain of a loss. What we do to recover can make a significant difference.

Staying in the Present: Staying in the present and that puts you in an empowering position where you can actively make choices and solve problems.

Mourn What Happened: Honour the impact the loss has had on you. Validate your pain and grieve your loss and unmet needs.

Reduce Expectations: How much you reduce your load will be a function of how much emotional distress you are experiencing. If your connection with the person you're grieving was very limited, then you may not need this kind of accommodation.

Get Creative: Art provides an innovative outlet for sharing and releasing grief, especially grief feelings that have been suppressed or that feel too painful to otherwise let out, and is a means of mourning a loss. Art may also provide temporary relief as a distraction from overwhelming pain.

Spending Time on the Land: Being in nature also reminds us of the cycle of life and that us and our loved one are still part of something greater than ourselves. It also is a space we can go to attend to our grief without intrusion from the on-going demands of work, family and everyday responsibilities. It allows us to unplug from technology and find quiet, solitude and comfort in life rhythms that are natural, soothing and restorative.



Take a Mindful Pause and Acknowledge your Feelings:

It can be hard to act rationally when you are emotionally charged. Pause and breathe to allow your body and brain to calm so you can respond rather than react. As you pause, notice your thoughts, feelings sensations and urges. It might be helpful to write them down. Label them and try and soften physical tension or discomfort.



Continue to Take Care of Yourself and Others:

Living life while grieving often feels like scaling a mountain. Grieving takes energy and can often feel draining. As much as possible during this tough time, continue to eat well, exercise, and maintain wellness practices. It is important to realize that your life changes following a traumatic loss.

Journaling: Is a powerful tool for reflection and expression. Consider keeping a grief journal to write about your grief journey or to preserve memories. You may also choose to write in a journal as though you're writing to the deceased.

Crying: Is a natural healing superpower, not a sign of weakness. Tears of grief contain leucine-enkephalin, an endorphin that reduces pain and improves mood. Therefore, we as humans have a built-in mechanism for releasing emotions, alleviating suffering and triggering the relaxation response.

Talk About your Feelings: More important than anything else when we grieve is to be able to be open about your feelings to someone else you trust and value (or more people if we can). Healing will not and cannot occur if you keep all of your feelings inside. This may be very different for anyone who is not used to talking about emotion, but is equally as beneficial. The expression just needs to be honest. Talk about what you miss, what you don't miss, what kind of person they were, your loss of shared hopes and dreams for the future, your loneliness, anger and sadness.

Allow Happiness: Although the overriding feeling of grief usually involves sadness, as the days, weeks and months progress, you may have moments or periods of happiness again. Don't feel guilty when you do. You don't need to feel bad all the time to honor the deceased. In fact, there is a very good chance that they would want you to start to enjoy life again. Returning feelings of happiness are your natural gift and indicate that you are slowly adapting to the loss in a healthy way.



Join a Support Group: Finding people who can understand what you are going through after a major loss can be difficult, and that's why a support group can be so helpful. Someone who is grieving themselves has first-hand experience with the depth of the feelings you may be experiencing and can in turn give you some of the support you need. You can feel very lonely after a death and this sense of isolation will only compound your suffering.



Getting Support While You Grieve

It is important to remember that we are forever changed by the death of someone we are very close to. The good news is that grief can also produce significant psychological and spiritual growth, depending on how we handle it. We can heal from the loss and the more severe pain will fade, but it will forever leave an emotional scar. Grieving is considered by many as a lifelong process. It affects your life direction and even your identity if the loss is significant. Also, in death, you develop a new type of relationship with your loved one, not based on their physical being but more on their memory and spirit.

You might find it hard to tell others how your loved one died. It is your choice how to talk about your loved one's death. Acknowledging that a death was by suicide can be an important part of healing. However, only you will know when that feels right for you. You may want to reach out and talk to a trusted person or a professional, such as your doctor, Elder, spiritual advisor, a social worker, a mental health nurse/outreach worker, or another person who has gone through what you are going through. They may help you figure out which words to use and how you want to talk about what has happened. There is no need to go into details of the death, and it is okay to let people know what you can and cannot talk about. Employers, co-workers, school, landlords, social groups and friends outside your community may need to be told of your loved one's death. You can ask someone else to make these phone calls for you if you cannot do this yet.

Some people may not know how to support you and some may pull away, but even one compassionate, understanding, and supportive person can make a big difference. It is important to find that person and you may not have to look far. Support is all around you. It can be difficult asking for help, but please do it.

Support People While They Grieve

Many survivors of suicide are left alone and in silence when what they desperately need is unconditional support and compassion, not shame or judgment from the decision made by their loved one. They may be suffering in a variety of ways due to:

- The loss of someone significant to the meaning of their life.
- A sudden, usually unexpected traumatic death; and three.
- They feel shunned by family or friends unable to support them with the pain of their unique grief.

Listen. Helping begins with your ability to be an active listener. Your physical presence and desire to listen without judging are critical helping tools. Don't worry so much about what you will say. Just concentrate on listening to the words that are being shared with you.

Have Compassion. Give the person who is grieving permission to express their feelings without fear of criticism or judgment. Try to learn and understand. Don't instruct or set expectations.

Be there. Your ongoing and reliable presence is the most important gift you can give. While you cannot take the pain away (nor should you try to), you can enter into it by being there for the griever. Remain available in the weeks, months, and years to come.

Language. Words matter, and the language we use can either support people's healing and offer comfort. The terms "committed suicide" and "completed suicide" are used in connection with criminal offences. Suicide is not a crime. In addition, the term "successful suicide" does not reflect reality – suicide is always a tragedy. "Died by suicide" more accurately reflects what has occurred. It is important to be mindful of the words we use when we are supporting someone who is grieving.



Navigating Support Services

Crisis Response Team: Mental Health Crisis Response Teams (MHCRT) provide services that support individuals, families and communities during and after critical events. These teams are mobilized through a centralized system to attend to the location of the critical event.

For more information, please contact your Wellness Organization in Nunavut:

Kitikmeot Region: 1-867-983-4670
(Department of Healthy Living – Cambridge Bay)

Kivalliq Region: 1-867-645-2600
(Pulaarvik Kablu Friendship Centre – Rankin Inlet)

Qikiqtani Region: 1-888-331-4433
(Ilisaqsivik – Clyde River)

Kamatsiaqtut Helpline
(1-867-979-3333 / 1-800-265-3333)

Government of Nunavut Employee/Family Assistance
(English, Inuktitut) 1-800-663-1142

Government of Canada Employee/Family Assistance
1-800-268-7708

National Indian Residential School
Crisis Line: 1-866-925-4419

Missing Murdered Indigenous
Women and Girls support: 1-844-413-6649

Canada Suicide Prevention Service
Call, text or chat (English) 9-8-8

First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Line
and Online Counselling Service and can request
Inuktitut: 1-855-242-3310 or connect to online
chat at hopeforwellness.ca

Healing by Talking
healing@gov.nu.ca
1-888-648-0070

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Embrace Life Council
www.inuusiq.com
1-800-265-3333