



National Bereavement Day in Canada

Frequently Asked Questions

What are grief and bereavement?

Grief is our normal response to loss. Bereavement is the state of being bereaved after someone important to us dies. When someone dies we naturally grieve. For many of us grief impacts all aspects of our lives; physically, socially, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually. We may feel grief in our bodies through muscle aches and pains, nausea, fatigue and weakness. It may also impact our relationships and even cause us to lose interest in our usual social activities and hobbies. When we're grieving we may have feelings that we didn't expect or that feel too intense, and this may add to our confusion and isolation. Sometimes we may experience 'grief brain' and have difficulty paying attention or concentrating, and even have trouble remembering things that used to come easily to us. Grief may also affect our sense of meaning and purpose in life; and even cause us to question our belief systems and values. No one grieves in exactly the same way as anyone else. Our grief is a unique reflection of the relationship we had with the person who died and will be influenced by our past experiences, current circumstances, and the availability of support.

Is there more than one type of grief?

The answer is yes. However, it likely isn't helpful for you or anyone other than a professional trained to assess grief and diagnose mental health disorders, to label or categorize your grief experience. Although life changing and, at times overwhelming, most people successfully make their way through grief. In fact, current research indicates that only 2-3% of people worldwide will experience a disabling form of grief known as complicated or prolonged grief.

What is the grief process?

The grief process naturally works to help us adjust to life without the person who died. The intensity of the thoughts and feelings that we experience in early grief motivates us to want to feel better and the longing that we feel for the person who died motivates us to find ways to feel connected. When grief is working well, we find that our focus naturally shifts between adjusting to the loss and what it means to us to live without the person who died, and restoring or rebuilding for ourselves a life of meaning and purpose.

How long is the grief process?

It is important that you and those who care about you know that grief is permanent; some part of you will always love and miss the person who died. In this way, we never "get over" the death of someone who was central to our lives, and many bereaved people realize they will never "let go" of the person who died. Instead, we learn to live with the loss and grief in ways that maintain and honour our bond with the person who died but don't limit our capacity for joy, pleasure and a meaningful life.

What can you do to help yourself and others?

What can you do for yourself when you are grieving?

- Make sure that you are getting adequate **sleep and nutrition**. If you are having difficulty in any of these areas, consider speaking with your family physician.
- **Learn about the grief process**. It can be very reassuring to know what is normal and what to expect.
- Make **exercise** part of your daily routine. Even a short walk or other brief physical activity can help to shift your mood.
- Learn one or two simple **relaxation** techniques. These can be very useful for times when your grief feels overwhelming.
- Spend some **time with other people**. Interacting with others can help you better understand your grief and rediscover meaning, purpose, and joy.

What you can do for someone who is grieving?

- **Spend time** with the bereaved person. Loneliness is a major aspect of grief for many people and asking for company can be difficult.
- **Ask** about the bereaved person's grief. Remember that asking about the person's grief doesn't cause it; it's there all the time.
- **Listen** without judgement or interference. Telling bereaved people what they should be doing or how they should be feeling isn't helpful. Just listen.
- **Talk** about the person who died. Bereaved people may get the feeling that you don't care or ever think about the person who died if you don't mention them.
- **Be accepting**. There will likely be times when the bereaved person doesn't want to spend time with you or want to, talk about his/her grief or the person who died. Let them know you're OK with that.
- Offer **concrete support** and suggestions. "Let me know if you need anything" is not helpful. A specific offer such as, "Can I cut your grass this week?" is.

What are some practical ways to handle grief in the workplace?

Many organizations offer just three days of bereavement leave, clearly that means many people return to their workplace well before they may be ready. This makes it important that employers create both a welcoming, flexible environment for grieving employees and offer tools and resources to help their colleagues be sensitive.

- Acknowledge the death (using the person's name). Ask the bereaved about their grief, letting them speak or be silent as they choose but let them know you are there as a supportive listener. Make time for them.
- Donate a vacation day to your grieving co-worker and encourage others to do the same.
- Where possible (with your supervisor's and colleague's consent), share your co-worker's responsibilities while they are on leave and, perhaps, when they return.

- Learn about grief, understanding that everyone grieves in their own way and their own time.

What to do if you need more help?

- Tell a supportive friend
- Consult a physician
- Talk with a grief counsellor
- Join a bereavement group: in person or online
- Find additional resources: in person or online