

Grief After Losing Your Health or Abilities

A gentle guide for understanding and support

Making space for the losses that can accompany illness, disability or physical change

Grief is not limited to bereavement. Illness, disability, chronic pain, injury or changes in physical ability can involve loss of independence, identity, confidence, work, relationships, plans and the body you once knew.

Acknowledging this grief does not mean rejecting the person you are now.

Understanding this kind of grief

- You may grieve what you could once do while also learning new ways to live. Acceptance does not have to mean liking what happened.
- Other people may focus on positivity or recovery when you need permission to name what has been lost.
- Identity can take time to rebuild when work, hobbies, appearance, energy or independence change.
- Grief and adaptation can coexist. You can value your present life while still missing parts of your previous one.

A gentle reminder

You do not have to prove that your grief is serious enough to deserve care. Loss is personal. What matters is the impact it has on you.

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Therapy & support that may help

Therapy is not about taking grief away or making you forget. At its best, it gives you a safe relationship in which the loss can be spoken about, understood and carried with less isolation.

Person-centred counselling - supports identity, emotional adjustment and self-compassion.

Health psychology or rehabilitation psychology - where available, can help with adjustment to illness, disability or long-term conditions.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) - may help some people build a meaningful life alongside difficult realities.

Peer support - condition-specific or disability communities can offer practical understanding and reduce isolation.

You do not have to start therapy simply because you are grieving. Some people are supported well by family, friends, community, reading or peer support. Others value professional help. Cruse Bereavement Support also offers bereavement information, helpline support, groups and one-to-one support in the UK.

When to reach for more help

Consider speaking with your GP or a qualified mental-health professional if grief is making everyday life feel persistently unmanageable, you are experiencing severe or worsening distress, trauma symptoms are dominating daily life, or you are worried about your safety. If you feel you may act on thoughts of harming yourself, seek urgent help through emergency services or a crisis service.

A few things that can help between difficult waves

- Reduce expectations on the hardest days. Grief uses physical as well as emotional energy.
- Keep basic needs visible: fluids, simple food, medication, sleep routines and fresh air where possible.
- Choose one or two safe people you can be honest with rather than feeling you must explain yourself to everyone.
- Create a small ritual of remembrance or acknowledgement if that feels right for you.
- Notice triggers and anniversaries in advance and plan extra gentleness around them.
- Allow moments of laughter, interest or rest without treating them as betrayal.

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Books I would recommend exploring

Books cannot tell you how you should grieve, but sometimes another person's words help us recognise something we have not yet been able to say ourselves.

How to Be Sick

Toni Bernhard

A compassionate perspective on living with chronic illness.

Wintering

Katherine May

Reflects on periods when life slows, changes or asks us to adapt.

The Invisible Kingdom

Meghan O'Rourke

Explores chronic illness, identity and the search for understanding.

A reflection to take with you

What have I lost, what remains important to me, and what might living well look like if I stop comparing today with my old life?

From me to you

Please be gentle with yourself. Grief is not a test you pass, a set of stages you complete, or evidence that you are failing to cope. Sometimes the most helpful thing we can do is make a little more room for what is already there. You are allowed to take this one day - or one hour - at a time.

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