

Appetite, Digestion and Physical Pain in Grief

Emotional and physical effects of grief

Grief is not only an emotion. It can affect sleep, appetite, energy, concentration, relationships, anxiety levels and the way the body feels. There is no single pattern and no correct timetable. This guide explores one part of that mind-body experience and offers practical, gentle ways to respond.

Changes in appetite and taste

Grief can reduce appetite, increase it, change taste or make eating feel like effort. Familiar meals may also carry memories. The immediate aim may simply be eating something manageable rather than achieving an ideal diet.

What may help: reduce unnecessary demands, use familiar routines where they are comforting, write down what you need to remember, and let trusted people help with practical tasks. Notice what genuinely settles or supports you rather than what you think you should be doing.

Swallowing, nausea and digestion

Stress can affect the digestive system. Some people notice nausea, stomach upset or a tight sensation when swallowing. Small portions and familiar foods may feel easier. Persistent swallowing problems, significant weight change or ongoing digestive symptoms deserve medical advice.

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Headaches, tension and body aches

Muscle tension, disrupted sleep and stress may contribute to headaches or body aches. Rest, warmth, gentle movement and hydration can help some people, but ongoing or unexplained pain should be assessed rather than attributed automatically to grief.

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Comfort eating and reduced appetite

Both can occur. Avoid moralising food during a period of loss. If eating patterns become distressing, prolonged, or affect health, a GP or appropriate clinician can help.

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Simple nourishment when cooking feels impossible

Keep the threshold low: ready meals, soup, toast, yoghurt, sandwiches, snacks or food brought by somebody else may be enough. Regularity can matter more than complexity.

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When physical symptoms need checking

Grief can produce genuine bodily symptoms, but grief does not protect anyone from unrelated illness. Seek medical advice for new, severe, persistent or recurrent symptoms, and urgent medical help for emergencies.

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A Message From Me

Grief can be emotional and physical at the same time. Please do not judge yourself for finding ordinary things harder. Your mind and body may both be adapting to a profound change. Take the next manageable step, accept support where it helps, and have persistent or worrying physical symptoms checked rather than assuming everything is grief.

Books you may find helpful

- Grief Works - Julia Samuel
- It's OK That You're Not OK - Megan Devine
- The Grieving Brain - Mary-Frances O'Connor
- The Plain Guide to Grief - John Wilson

Support and when to seek more help

Cruse Bereavement Support offers bereavement information and support. The NHS provides guidance on grief, bereavement, loss and prolonged grief disorder. Speak with your GP if physical symptoms are persistent or concerning, or if grief is substantially affecting your ability to function. If you are in immediate danger or need urgent mental health help, use urgent NHS services; Samaritans can also be contacted on 116 123.

With warmth,

Maggie

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