

Grief, Anxiety and the Nervous System

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.

Why grief can feel like anxiety

Loss can alter a person's sense of safety and predictability. The nervous system may remain watchful, especially after a sudden or traumatic death. Thoughts about further loss, health or the future can become louder.

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.

Adrenaline, breathlessness and palpitations

Anxiety during grief can include a racing heart, shaking, breathlessness, dizziness or a sense of panic. These sensations can be frightening. New, severe, persistent or worrying physical symptoms should not automatically be assumed to be grief and should be medically checked.

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.

Feeling unsafe after a loss

When somebody important dies, the world can feel less secure. People may become more alert to danger, worry about loved ones or struggle to be alone. Predictable routines and trusted company can help restore some sense of steadiness.

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.

Panic and sudden surges

A surge can peak quickly. Put both feet somewhere supported if comfortable, notice the room around you, loosen anything restrictive, take slower natural breaths rather than huge forced breaths, and remind yourself that you can seek help if symptoms feel medically concerning.

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.

Grounding without forcing calm

Grounding is not about telling yourself not to grieve. It is a way of giving the body information about the present moment. Temperature, texture, familiar music, a weighted blanket, movement or naming visible objects may be more useful than one prescribed technique.

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.

When to speak to a GP or therapist

Speak with a GP if anxiety, sleep problems or physical symptoms are persistent, severe or affecting daily life. Bereavement counselling or person-centred therapy can offer a place to explore grief without being hurried through it.

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.

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

Space to Breathe Therapy • Support Hub