

When Grief Feels Overwhelming

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 emotions can feel so intense

Grief can affect almost every part of emotional life. Feelings may arrive together or contradict one another: sadness alongside relief, love alongside anger, numbness alongside sudden tears. This does not mean you are grieving incorrectly. Loss asks the mind to take in a reality it may not yet be ready to fully absorb.

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.

Shock, numbness and disbelief

In the early days, some people describe moving through life in a daze. Numbness can create enough distance to manage practical tasks before the emotional reality becomes clearer. Other people feel everything immediately. Neither response measures how much somebody loved or valued the person who died.

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.

Sadness, yearning and loneliness

Yearning can be physical as well as emotional. You may automatically reach for the phone, expect a familiar sound, or momentarily forget that the person is gone. Loneliness may also appear in company because what is missed is not simply another person in the room, but a particular relationship.

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.

Anger, guilt and relief

Anger may be directed towards circumstances, professionals, family, the person who died or yourself. Guilt often grows around 'if only' thoughts. Relief can appear after a long illness or difficult relationship and may itself cause guilt. Mixed emotions are part of many grief experiences.

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.

Emotional waves and unexpected triggers

A song, smell, photograph, date or ordinary routine can bring grief close again without warning. A difficult wave does not erase progress. It can simply show that memory and attachment remain meaningful.

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.

Making an overwhelming moment smaller

When the whole future feels impossible, reduce the task. Focus on the next drink, meal, shower, phone call or ten minutes. Sit somewhere safe, lower demands, contact somebody you trust and allow the intensity to change without requiring yourself to solve grief.

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