

Grief and the Body

Understanding the physical experience of grief

Understanding what may be happening

Grief is emotional, but it can also be felt physically. Sleep, appetite, digestion, muscle tension and energy can all be affected. Some people notice headaches, heaviness, restlessness or a sense of being physically unsettled.

Physical sensations can become worrying in their own right. When a person is already under emotional strain, unfamiliar bodily sensations may be interpreted as another threat.

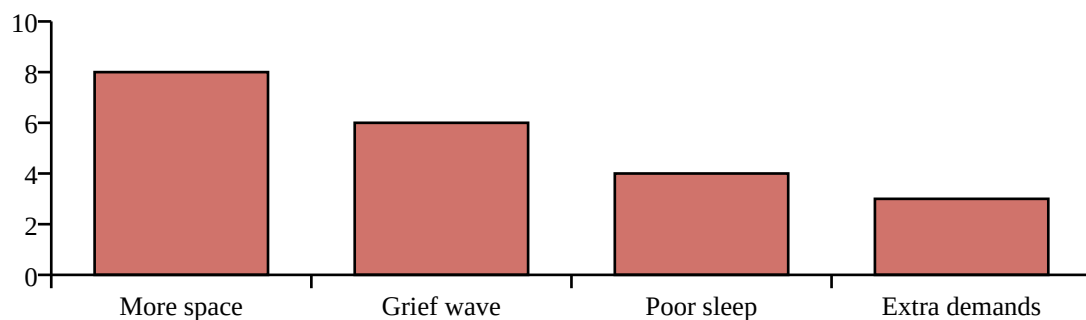
Gentle care for the body can provide useful anchors, while new, severe or persistent symptoms should be discussed with an appropriate healthcare professional rather than automatically attributed to grief.

Common experiences

- Changes in sleep
- Changes in appetite
- Tension in jaw, shoulders or chest
- Digestive changes
- Headaches or fatigue
- Restlessness or feeling slowed down

A useful way to think about capacity

Illustrative coaching scale - not measured clinical data



This graph is an illustrative coaching tool rather than a clinical measurement. It shows how available capacity can reduce when several demands overlap. The purpose is to help you plan from the capacity you actually have, not the capacity you think you should have.

What can make this harder

Can add pressure	May be more supportive
• Ignoring symptoms because they are 'only grief' • Expecting perfect self-care • Using exercise or activity to avoid all emotion • Skipping basic needs when capacity is low	• Keep food and fluids accessible • Use gentle movement if it feels helpful • Build a wind-down routine • Notice tension without forcing it away • Track persistent symptoms • Seek medical advice when concerned

A worked coaching example

A body check-in can be brief: What do I notice? What might I need? Is this familiar, or is it new or concerning? The purpose is awareness, not self-diagnosis.

Try the STOP - SORT - SUPPORT method

STOP	SORT	SUPPORT
Pause long enough to notice what is actually happening rather than immediately pushing through.	Separate what needs action now, what can wait and what is an emotion rather than a task.	Choose one form of support: rest, a reminder, company, practical help, a professional conversation or a boundary.

Reflection & coaching questions

Use these gently. You do not need to answer them all. One useful answer is enough for a session or a difficult day.

- Where do I notice grief in my body?
- Which basic need have I overlooked?
- What helps my body settle?
- What symptoms are persistent enough to discuss with a professional?
- What would gentle care look like today?

My personal check-in

What I notice	What I need	My smallest next step

A one-week experiment

Choose one adjustment from this guide and try it for seven days. Keep the experiment deliberately small. At the end of the week, ask: Did this reduce pressure? Did it make something easier to begin? Did it protect energy? If it did not help, that is useful information too - choose a different adjustment rather than treating it as failure.

Books & further resources

Books can offer language, companionship and different ways of understanding grief. You do not need to read them from beginning to end. A chapter or a few pages may be enough.

- **The Grieving Brain** - Mary-Frances O'Connor
- **Grief Works** - Julia Samuel
- **Bearing the Unbearable** - Joanne Cacciatore

Further support

Cruse Bereavement Support offers bereavement information and support. **NHS** guidance includes information on grief after bereavement and other significant losses. **Samaritans** provides confidential emotional support on 116 123, day or night.

When extra support may be useful

Consider speaking with a GP, therapist, bereavement service or another appropriate professional if grief is having a persistent or severe effect on daily life, if anxiety or low mood is becoming difficult to manage, if physical symptoms concern you, or if you feel unable to stay safe. In an immediate emergency, seek urgent help.

A final coaching thought

The aim is not to make grief small. It is to make the demands around grief more manageable, so you have a little more room to live alongside what has happened.