

COPING

WITH

*Grief*

## **Because We Love, We Cry    by Sheree Fitch**

Sometimes there is no sense to things my child  
Sometimes there is no answer to the questions why  
Sometimes things beyond all understanding  
Sometimes, people die.  
When it hurts like this, my child  
When you are scared, suffering, confused  
Even if we are not together  
Together, let us cry  
Remember there is so much love  
Because we love, we cry.

Sometimes the sadness takes away your breath  
Sometimes the pain seems endless, deep  
Sometimes you cannot find the sun  
Sometimes you wish you were asleep.  
When it hurts like this , my child  
When you are scared, suffering, confused  
Even if we are not together,  
Together, let us cry  
Remember there is still so much love  
Because we love, we cry.

Pray that I had answers, child  
Pray this wasn't so  
There are impossible things, child  
I cannot bear for you to know.  
When it hurts like this, my child  
When you are scared, suffering, confused  
Even if we are not together  
Together, let us cry  
Yes, there is still so SO So much love  
I am ever by your side.

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The original version of this booklet was compiled by Janet Allen, RSW. Amendments and updates have been made by Colchester East Hants Hospice Society staff and volunteers.

## **Introduction**

At Colchester East Hants Hospice Society, we recognize that there are many different ways to cope with grief. You may prefer to talk about your loved one and your feelings, or you may prefer to process things on your own. You might want to read or hear stories about others' grief and loss, or to focus more on your own experience of how loss has touched your life. There is no correct way to grieve and different coping skills might work for you at different times. Sometimes having supportive information at your fingertips can provide comfort when other forms of coping aren't available or stop working.

This booklet provides information about grieving and practical strategies for coping after the death of someone important to you. Feel free to use this booklet however you wish – you may want to look at it on your own, reading it all or just read parts of it. You may want to share it with family, friends, or other support people as a tool for starting conversations about your grief. Of course, not all of the coping suggestions provided here will work for everybody all the time, but we hope that within these materials you may find something that is useful to you during this difficult time.

## **What is grief?**

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Grief is a natural response to any type of loss. People need both physical and emotional energy to cope with the changes brought on by any kind of loss - the loss of a job, the end of a marriage, losses connected with children

moving out on their own. By virtue of having relationships in the world and moving through different life stages, we all experience grief to some degree. At some point in our lives, we will also all experience the grief of loss related to death. And the grief for every death will be different.

Grief is part of the human response to death. It is an active and ongoing process that impacts you on many levels:

- emotionally (how you feel)
- cognitively (how you think)
- socially (how you relate to others)
- physically (how your body feels), and
- spiritually (faith, hopefulness or meaning in life)

There is no right way to grieve and no set time frame for grieving to take place. For some people grief is an intense and even crippling experience; for other people their grief can seem mild. For some the intense feelings can last a short time and for others they can persist long after the person has died. For some people, grief may become more intense some weeks or months after the person's death.

In our society, grief is often talked about in terms of steps or stages that must be accomplished in order to move through feelings connected with loss.

It is important to understand that everyone grieves differently. It is a unique process; it is not a standard checklist of things to get through. Knowing some of the common signs of grief could help you anticipate what may happen and to help you feel less alone.

## Ten common grief reactions

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Although your grieving will unfold in a unique way, there are several common reactions you may experience to some degree. They are in no particular order. You may not experience them all.

**Shock.** When you learn that someone you care about has died, you may feel numb. Perhaps no emotions or tears will come. You may go through a prolonged stage of shock or you may express your emotions immediately. Both reactions are very common. Sometimes there is a sense of disbelief that the person is never coming back. Gradually the reality of what has happened sinks in more and more, which might lead you to express a variety of emotional responses.

**Emotional release.** There can be many triggers for emotional release: the moment you find out about the death, the funeral/memorial service, or months later when you find your person's favourite shoes in the back of the closet. Crying is an expression of grief and can be very healing, but in our society experiencing emotion and showing emotion are far too often discouraged. It's important to be aware of your own emotional reactions and find manageable ways to let those feelings out.

**Anger.** When grieving you may respond to others with irritability and anger. The effort of trying to keep things together emotionally and attend to all of the practical arrangements that need to be made, while trying to fulfil your everyday duties may cause you to have very little patience for others and lose your temper. It's common to

feel frustrated when others seem insensitive or don't understand what you're going through. Furthermore, you may feel angry at the world because your person has died, and this may filter into your daily relationships.

**Sadness or despair.** Some people may feel like there is nothing to live for and that nothing they do seems worthwhile anymore. You might feel a sense of hopelessness – that nothing will ever be good again. You may lose faith that the world is a good place and feel an overall sense of despair.

**Guilt.** There is often some sense of guilt in grieving. You may think of many things that you could have, or should have, done differently when the person was alive. There can be a tendency to be hard on yourself. You may even think that if you'd done something different or better maybe your person would still be alive. Sometimes, particularly when someone dies after a period of illness, you may experience a sense of relief, which can trigger guilty feelings. These are normal feelings. You are not alone. Also, if there was any anger, tension, or conflict between you and your person who died, you may experience guilt or that something is unfinished or unresolved.

**Social withdrawal.** When you're grieving, you might feel like withdrawing from social relationships for a while as it may be difficult to proceed with your normal daily routines. You may feel an overall sense of disinterest or lack of motivation. The thought of participating in activities, hobbies, or interests you used to enjoy might now seem completely overwhelming. You may not want to talk to, or see, anyone. It is a normal protective instinct

to want to withdraw when in pain, but if this persists for a long period of time, it might be a good idea to talk with a counsellor about what you're feeling.

**Physical distress.** Symptoms such as tightness in the throat, shortness of breath or a hollow feeling in the stomach may come in waves lasting from a few minutes to hours. You may find that you feel tense and anxious a lot of the time without really knowing why. Some people can experience a dramatic loss of appetite along with digestive problems. Others might experience a marked increase in appetite and feel the urge to eat constantly. Sleep patterns might become altered – either having difficulties sleeping, or feeling tired and wanting to sleep all of the time. There are many variations on the physical signs of grief and they are normal responses to loss. However, if you're experiencing any that are of particular concern and have continued for a long period of time, it's best to consult your healthcare provider.

**Preoccupation with the deceased.** You may try to think of other things but find yourself unable to stop thinking about the person who died. It may be difficult to concentrate on anything. Certain aspects of your person's death might play over and over in your mind. When the phone rings, you might forget for a minute that your person died and expect to hear their voice on the other end. Or think you see them walking down a crowded street. These thought patterns are perfectly normal reactions. It takes a while to mentally adjust to losing someone who was a big part of your life.

**Spiritual questioning.** You may struggle with large, painful questions like, "Why did this have to happen?",

“Why do people have to die?”, “What is the point of life or death?” When you’re grieving, these questions often indicate a search for meaning or trying to make sense of the loss. Some may turn to faith for comfort, others may question their faith as the result of a loss.

**Readjusting.** Gradually, you will adjust to loss, forming new relationships and routines. Over time, you might find that you experience a sweet sadness when remembering your loved one – glad for having known and loved them, but sad that they are no longer with you. Some might call this moving forward, and perhaps it is, but you can also think of it as the natural shifting and changing of grief. Often grief is talked about as if it has an endpoint, a place where you will no longer hurt.

While pain does tend to lessen over time, there is always a chance that grief might reappear, no matter how much time passes or how well you feel you are progressing. It’s normal that grief, sometimes intense grief, pops up every once in a while when you least expect it. Dr. Teresa Rando calls those moments STUGs - Subsequent Temporary Upsurges in Grieving. Children have likened them to a ‘grief burst’, similar to a cloud-burst. It is a reminder of the connection that remains even when someone has died.

## **Coping with grief: Self-care**

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With all of these emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual effects, it’s understandable that at times you may struggle to know how to deal with grief. It can all seem overwhelming and confusing. Grief can surprise you

with its intensity and impact. Grieving is a time when your usual ways of coping with life stresses might not be enough. It's important to have a variety of coping tools you can draw on in different situations, at different times, that might help sustain you during your grief.

When you're grieving, it's understandable that certain aspects of taking care of yourself may be neglected. You may be distracted, busy making necessary arrangements, dealing with all kinds of change and uncertainty, and these emotions are coming at you from all angles. Therefore it makes sense that grief can affect your daily habits and routines, sometimes dramatically. Taking care of your sleep and your diet, and keeping a balance between relaxation and activity, is important as you grieve. This might seem like common sense advice, but when your world gets turned upside down by death, your basic self-care can be the first thing to go.

### **Breathing**

It sounds so simple, but when you're experiencing intense emotions you can quickly forget to just relax and breathe. One of the best things we can do to cope with stressful, emotional, and painful situations is to try to regain some of our calm. An important element of relaxation is keeping your breathing slow and steady. When you're anxious or experiencing other intense emotions your breathing tends to speed up and get very shallow. It can become difficult to catch your breath. If you practice controlling your breathing, you may be able to ease some of the physical and emotional sensations of grief.

Are you aware that there are two kinds of breathing? The one you do every day when you're not really thinking

about it is chest breathing. When you inhale, your chest and shoulders rise, sometimes a little, sometimes a lot. Maybe try to notice if you're doing that right now.

Belly breathing is diaphragm breathing is a slower, deeper breath. Babies breathe this way automatically and most adults do this naturally when lying down and preparing to go to sleep. However, you usually have to remind yourself to breathe this way going about your day-to-day tasks. Here is a quick exercise.

Sit comfortably or lie down. Put one hand on your upper chest, and the other on your belly.

Breathe in slowly through your nose - you should be able to feel the hand on your belly moving out. The hand on your chest shouldn't move much.

Breathe out gently through your mouth and when the belly is close to the spine, breathe in again through your nose.

Try this in the morning when you wake up and again when you go to bed, or if you are feeling anxious. If you feel dizzy or lightheaded, stop doing it and try again later.

## **Eating**

Eating patterns can be profoundly affected by your emotions. You may have decreased appetite or seek to ease painful feelings by indulging in favourite comfort foods. Having a healthy balanced diet gives you the fuel

to physically and emotionally get through your day, however, this can be a challenge when grieving. You may not have the energy or motivation to cook, or may not have a lot of cooking knowledge or skill if your person who died made most of the meals for the family. When poor eating habits continue over extended periods of time your energy and mood, and your own health can be greatly affected.

So here are some helpful hints for establishing a healthier routine.

- Try several small meals each day and have healthy, nutrient rich snacks available. A good resource is the [Canada Food Guide](#)
- Try planning your meals in advance. Making a weekly meal plan and preparing by getting all the necessary groceries can help keep you on track.
- Ask someone you know, or the grocery store dietician, for some simple recipes for one or some recipes that can be divided and frozen in individual serving sizes. A good source of information for recipes when cooking for 1 or 2 is [Dieticians Canada](#)
- If you don't mind cooking, invite someone to a meal so you will prepare something for that occasion and you can then reheat the leftovers for some meals afterwards.
- Find a local source of healthy pre-prepared meals.

### **Sleeping**

Sleep is often affected during times of high stress. This is a double whammy because when you're tired and run down, your emotions can feel even harder to manage. It's

important to make an effort to get enough sleep. Here are some habits for a good night's sleep.

- Try as much as possible to stick to a set time and routine for both going to bed and getting up. This cues your body that it's time for sleep.
- Even though you may feel tired a lot when you're grieving, remember that naps during the day may make sleeping at night more difficult
- When possible, it's best to avoid certain substances for about 4-6 hours before you go to bed such as alcohol, caffeine, and food that is overly rich or spicy or sugary.
- Try to get some form of physical exercise during the day and spend some time outdoors if you can. Exposure to natural light helps regulate your body's sleep rhythms.
- Create an environment ideal for sleeping i.e. use comfortable bedding, minimize the amount of light in the room, keep the temperature cool (not too cold), and block out any noises and distractions (ear plugs and/or a sleep mask may help with this).
- If you can, try to avoid using your bed for eating, working, or watching TV. The less you associate your bed with anything other than sleep, the better.
- Establish a pre-sleep ritual. This may be a warm bath or other personal care ritual. It might be a few minutes of reading. You might like to listen to music or the radio. Try to avoid looking at a screen of any kind (computer, TV, mobile phone, ipad, etc.) right before you try to go to sleep. This kind

of activity tends to stimulate your brain rather than cue it that it's time to shut down for a while.

*Suggestions adapted from the University of Maryland Medical Center, Sleep Disorders Center*

## **Moving**

It is harder than it sounds when you are feeling the fatigue and stress that can come with grief. Maintaining a healthy balance between relaxation and moving can be a challenge even when you are not under the pressures of grieving. Getting some gentle exercise such as taking the stairs rather than the elevator, doing some gardening, or taking a walk outdoors may help improve your ability to cope.

Physical activity stimulates various brain chemicals that will have a positive effect on your mood and outlook on life. Exercise and physical activity also delivers oxygen and nutrients to your organs and tissues. They help your cardiovascular system work more efficiently, giving you more energy to go about your daily tasks.

Getting some exercise can be easier when you are not doing it alone. Try making a regular date with a friend for a walk or look into local groups and clubs for a fitness class that would best meet your needs.

Grief is hard work. During this time we may experience unusual health problems - more infections, compromised immune responses, cardiac issues, or other concerns. Take yourself seriously and listen to your body. Schedule an appointment with your doctor or

nurse practitioner if you experience any unusual symptoms, or call 8-1-1 for guidance.

### **Giving yourself permission**

You may need to intentionally seek permission from yourself every day to grieve. In many ways, we live in a world that pretends there is no sickness and death, no sadness and no pain. We are constantly exposed to the idea that having feelings is bad – an indication of personal weakness – rather than a normal and essential part of being human. As a result, you might be convinced that you shouldn't be sad when someone you love dies, or that you're allowed to feel a little bit sad, but not too much or for too long. There is no magic potion or shortcut through grief. In fact, the most direct way through grief is to address it head-on rather than finding ways to avoid it. One way to do this is to give ourselves permission to feel as bad as we do.

### *Self-talk: Being kind to ourselves*

If you've lived a lifetime believing you need to avoid sadness at all costs, how do you suddenly convince yourself that it's okay to be sad? Of course it can help to talk to someone else, a trusted friend, family member, volunteer, or counsellor –to validate that it's okay. But rarely do we have unlimited access to those who can offer us this constant kindness and compassion. We must rely on ourselves for confirmation that it is ok to be sad.

Everyone has an inner dialogue happening all the time – there's a running conversation with ourselves in our heads – this conversation is called self-talk. When you are

grieving you may find that your self-talk includes: *Stop being so silly. Smarten up and get on with things. There's something seriously wrong with me. Get a grip.*

The first step is noticing when judgmental or shaming thoughts occur most frequently: When you're at work? When you're alone? When someone else tells you what you should or shouldn't be doing? Once you're more aware of negative thoughts about grief, you can start to shift to thoughts that are more accepting of your grief. Are you talking to yourself the way you would talk to a close friend, or to a child who's in pain? Now, take a breath and refocus. You are doing your best.

Here are some things you can say to yourself that are gentle and comforting that also acknowledge the reality of what you may be feeling:

- *I feel really bad today, but it won't always be like this.*
- *It's okay to do whatever I need to do to grieve.*
- *I loved \_\_\_\_\_ so much and their death has created a huge hole in my life.*
- *My grief and feelings of loss are normal.*
- *My heart hurts.*
- *Feeling angry and lost is a normal part of grief.*
- *Remembering \_\_\_\_\_ is painful, but I want to because they were important to me.*
- *It won't always be like this. And I will always remember them.*

You may not be accustomed to talking to yourself in this way and it might feel odd or uncomfortable, especially at

first. Some people find it helpful to write down their self-talk. Putting your negative thoughts on paper can help get them out of your head and make them easier to challenge.

You may want to use more positive messages as affirmations. For instance, writing down comforting thoughts, ideas, quotes, or lyrics and keeping them in a wallet or posting them on the fridge as reminders. Seeing these messages daily (even if you don't completely believe them yet) can help move your self-talk toward compassion and comfort. Grief tends to be just a little easier to bear if you are not constantly subjected to messages from others or yourself pushing you to get over it.

### *Boundaries: Balancing time alone and time with others*

It is both helpful and important to give yourself permission to feel the way you feel through nurturing self-talk, but realistically you may not always receive this permission from others. That's why it's important to communicate your needs and limits to the people around us.

Setting boundaries means setting limits in relationships. Everyone needs healthy boundaries for relationships to feel satisfying and fulfilling. It's important to remember that boundaries are not fixed. They vary depending on the situation and context, and sometimes you may not know where your boundaries lie. The first step to healthy boundaries is awareness.

Grief can disrupt usual patterns of deciding how much or how little contact you want to have with people. When grieving, you may not know what you need from day to day or even moment to moment.

Even if you do know, your emotional and social needs can change very quickly and without warning. One minute you may crave the peace and quiet of being by yourself; yet when you're actually alone you can suddenly feel emotionally overwhelmed by the solitude and want people and activity around you for comfort or distraction.

When someone dies, people close to you often want to help. Even though their timing may not be ideal, they may bring food, invite you to events and functions, call frequently to chat, or stop by unexpectedly just to see how you're doing. This contact can be comforting and welcome on some days, while at other times it can feel overwhelming and exhausting. After someone close dies, it's normal to feel that simple social interactions require a great deal of energy and concentration. There will likely be times when you want to ask others to give you some space and times when you need to reach out to others. You may fear hurting someone's feelings if you turn them away. Perhaps you could post a note on your door saying, "Thank you for coming by. I am resting right now but would be happy to see you after 3:00."

Alternatively, you may worry about being a burden to others if you ask them for anything. When you need help, try to recall a time when you have been able to give meaningful assistance to someone. Do you remember

how good it felt to know you were helping? Don't deprive others of that wonderful feeling of satisfaction as they would like to help you.

### **Setting limits**

Below are some possible strategies to express your limits.

Situation: After you've gone to bed, a friend calls to see how you are doing.

Response: *It's so nice that you called and I want to connect with you but I'm very tired. Call I call you at 10 tomorrow morning?*

Situation: A holiday weekend is coming and you receive several invitations to spend it with family and friends.

Responses: *I'd like to come but I've already accepted another invitation. Could we do something together next week? OR Thank you but this year, I'm feeling like I need to be on my own. It helps to know though that there's somewhere to go if I feel like going out.*

Situation: You are invited to a concert that starts in a couple of hours.

Responses: *That sounds like something I'd like to do, but I don't think I can be ready in time. Please keep me in mind for next time. OR I've had a rough day today. Could we maybe sit and talk for a while instead?*

Situation: Your co-workers are taking on your responsibilities to make things easier for you.

Responses: *I think I can take care of my regular duties now, but I appreciate that you're concerned about me. OR Thanks but I'm actually glad to be able to focus on work right now and I'll be sure to ask for help if I need it.*

Many of the responses above have a common pattern - begin with an acknowledgement of the person's kindness; follow with your refusal of what they are proposing; end with a suggested option indicating that you would like what they are offering at a different time, whether it is their help or their company. Sandwiching your refusal with appreciation on either end may help the person offering to not feel rejected.

### **Asking for help**

Below are some possible strategies when asking for help.

Situation: You feel like it's time to deal with your loved one's belongings, but are struggling with how to do this on your own.

*Responses: It would be a really big help to me if we could set a time to go through \_\_\_\_\_'s things together. OR If you're willing, I would appreciate some help with this task that seems so overwhelming right now."*

Situation: You're feeling very lonely, especially in the hours before going to bed.

Responses: *I was wondering if you'd mind calling me a couple of evenings a week for a while. It helps to hear someone else's voice at night. OR How about we arrange to talk every Monday evening for half an hour or so – would that be ok?*

Situation: You're having a hard time preparing meals just for yourself.

Responses: *Would you like to get together for dinner this week? OR A few weeks ago you dropped off a casserole and it was so good! Could I have the recipe?*

Situation: You're having a hard day and feel like talking to someone, but don't really know what to say.

Responses: *Hi. If you're not busy, could we talk for a bit? Just tell me about your day and what's going on with you. OR I'm feeling kind of down and I don't need you to cheery me up, but I'd just like to hang out.*

## **Coping with grief-related emotions**

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As described throughout this booklet, grieving typically involves a wide range of emotional reactions. It has been referred to as a roller-coaster: lots of sharp turns, huge dips, and unexpected changes of direction – and a lot of the time you can't see where you're going!

You might feel totally unlike your normal self in that you experience thoughts, feelings and reactions you've never had before – some of which may be uncomfortable and painful, and some of which might be powerful and uplifting. Experiencing intense and rapid changes in mood and emotions are a normal part of grief. Therefore you may need different coping skills at different times to deal with the various emotions that can arise when grieving.

### **Anxious feelings**

At times, all of us are prone to feelings of anxiety which may include worrying, nervousness, and/or a general sense of unease. Anxious feelings can be related to a specific event or they may seem vague and unclear.

People experience grief-related anxiety in many different ways. Anxious feelings can arise because the person who died provided you with a sense of safety in the world, which has now been damaged. Your financial, social, and living circumstances can change dramatically as a result of a death, which can create a lot of fear or worry. You might have your own fears about death or illness triggered by the death of someone close to you.

Oftentimes, these anxious feelings surface in the form of persistent, intrusive thoughts about the person who died, the circumstances of their death, or fears about your own future. These thoughts can race around in your mind, creating emotional distress and sometimes interfere with your sleep and concentration. While you may not be able to stop them completely, there are ways to help make intrusive thoughts a bit more manageable.

One strategy is to do some general relaxation exercises to help calm racing thoughts and fearful feelings. Basic breathing exercises have been proven effective. (See p.8 of this booklet.) You may want to try a body relaxation exercise together with deep breathing.

The Body Relaxation Exercise below takes you through a process of consciously tensing and relaxing specific muscles in the body. It can be used anywhere and at any time.

Our natural state of being in this hectic, busy world is one of tension and tightness rather than relaxation and looseness. For that reason, the exercise may feel silly or awkward but it is a learned skill that can take some

practice before it feels comfortable or easy. It helps to practice these tools when your feelings are not intense, making them easier to utilize when you are feeling overwhelmed.

### Body Relaxation Exercise

1. Sit comfortably or lie down. Close your eyes. Breathe slowly and relax.
2. Continue breathing naturally while you tense your toes, hold for ten seconds, then release.
3. Next, tense your feet, hold for ten seconds, then release.
4. Tense your calf muscles, hold for ten seconds, then release.
5. Continue tensing and relaxing muscle groups from your feet to your head including toes, feet, thighs, buttocks, stomach, shoulders, arms, hands, fingers, neck and face.
6. If you notice lingering tension, repeat the process from head to toe.
7. Continue breathing naturally and if any one part of the body remains tense, concentrate on tensing and relaxing that muscle group several more times.

As beneficial as full body relaxation can be, it may not always slow down your racing thoughts. It may help to focus on an image in your mind to help manage intrusive thoughts. Some examples of images might include putting your thoughts in cartoon thought bubbles that you can then mentally pop when they

become distracting. You might imagine your thoughts written on the side of railway cars passing by and mentally slowing down or speeding up the train. Another method is picturing your thoughts floating by on clouds, whether light and fluffy or dark and stormy, and imagining a strong breeze pushing the thought clouds away. The key to any mental imagery exercise is to make the image personal and meaningful for you and as detailed as possible.

There might be a recurring thought that you wish would just go away. While it's natural to want to banish certain thoughts from your mind, it may indicate the need for further investigation. It is difficult to send thoughts away permanently, but you can practice methods to help keep them at bay until you have the energy and space to deal with what that thought is trying to tell you.

One strategy that may be useful for managing intrusive thoughts is creating a mental container where we can securely store them. An example of how you can develop your own thought container is on the next page.

*Be careful how you are talking to yourself  
because you are listening. - Lisa M. Hayes*

*Grief is not a disorder, a disease or sign of  
weakness. It is an emotional, physical, and  
spiritual necessity. The price you pay for love.  
The only cure for grief is to grieve. - Earl Grollman*

## The Container

Try to picture a secure container, sitting in front of you, or maybe in another secure place. This container will be strong enough to hold whatever you choose to place in it. There must be a way to open and close the container if and when you choose to do so.

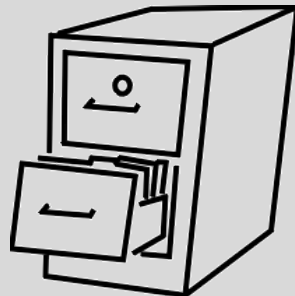
Perhaps it is a safe, a filing cabinet, a shipping container, a crate, a trunk, a safety deposit box, or some other vessel.

Picture everything about your container in detail. What colour is it? How big is it? What does it look like? What is it made of? What makes it safe and secure? Does it have a lock? How does it open and close?

Think about your container's capacity. Can it hold more than one thought? Maybe different anxious thoughts need different containers. Picture as many containers as you need, but remember to imagine them as vividly as possible.

Now imagine taking your anxious thought and putting it inside the container. Repeat the thought in your head or say it out loud and then picture yourself placing the thought inside your container, securely closing the lid or cover, shutting the door, and locking it if you wish. Now that your thought is inside, where do you want the container to stay? Imagine leaving your container in a secure place.

You can access your container at any time when you want to add to it or retrieve a thought to examine it before storing it away again.



## **Anger**

Others may tell you that you must get angry to move through the grieving process. While it's true that anger is a common emotional response to loss, each person will experience grief-related anger differently, and some might not experience it at all.

Anger can be experienced as sudden bursts of rage that feel at times uncontrollable, or as a constant, steady burn that seems to seep into every aspect of our lives. When you experience anger, it may feel uncomfortable, wrong, or irrational and that makes it very difficult to cope with in effective and healthy ways.

Grief-related anger can take many forms. Sometimes frustration or irritability might seem like better words to describe your angry feelings. You may experience persistent frustration because others don't seem to understand what you're going through. You may get upset when you feel that others are not supporting you enough or in the right way.

You may experience anger about the specific circumstances of your person's death. For instance, if they died from an illness, a common response is to direct anger towards the physicians and health professionals who were unable to save them. You might experience anger toward the person who died – for things they did in life or for leaving you in death and that, in turn, may bring feelings of guilt. You might experience anger toward the world or at God for allowing this to happen. You may even experience a combination of these at different times during your grieving. Each of these sources of anger (and many more) are normal, valid reactions to loss.

You may be aware that holding angry feelings inside can be damaging to your physical health and emotional well-being. But sometimes it can be hard to know how to express angry feelings without harming yourself or someone else. Here are some suggestions on how to express anger effectively. As with all of the coping strategies discussed in this book, not all methods will work for everyone, so you may need to experiment to find what works for you.

- Anger is, above all, a very physical emotion. It makes us want to *do* something. Therefore physical activity can be an effective way of coping with anger. Running, punching a pillow, going to the gym, swimming, or brisk walking can all be ways to work out your anger.
- It may be helpful to write down your angry thoughts. These do not need to be seen or read by anyone else, therefore they don't have to be pretty or even legible.
- Anger can be expressed through art. You might try drawing, painting, sculpture, etc. It doesn't have to be fancy or elaborate – crayons are very effective! Think of what colours you'd need to draw or paint your angry feelings. Also, it can help to use a large canvas or paper – often anger inspires broad, sweeping strokes.
- Play some music – LOUD! Some people find it very satisfying to crank up the stereo and sing at the top of their lungs to vent anger, or to dance it out. But remember to respect the neighbours.
- Scream and yell! If you have a favourite spot where you can have some privacy – the beach, the

woods, in your car, in the shower – it can be very helpful to scream and cry and rage at the world in a safe way without alarming the neighbours.

- Talk to someone. You may keep anger inside, afraid that you might upset others, that you may be judged as ugly, mean, or labelled as an angry person. You might want to be selective about who you share your anger with, but a trusted, nonjudgmental friend, counsellor, or support group can be a safe place to give voice to your anger.
- Count to 10. It sounds deceptively simple, but giving yourself some cool-down time can help you learn more about your anger and its source. Anger is a secondary emotion and signifies that there are other emotions that need attention: sadness, hurt, disappointment, fear, helplessness, confusion, guilt, etc. After a countdown, we might find that it is not our anger we need to voice, but a more complicated mix of feelings at its center.

## **Guilt**

Guilt is experienced when we believe (accurately or not) that we have done something wrong or have fallen short of your own high expectations. Guilt related to grieving often involves feelings and thoughts about all the things we should have done differently. *I should have known something was wrong. I should have spent more time with them. I should have made them see a doctor sooner. I should've been there at the end.* 'The should's' are another way of wishing your person was still alive.

Many people feel a strong sense of guilt if they are not present when their person dies. The fact is, most people

are not there when their person dies. Perhaps the dying person waited until they were alone before releasing themselves to death. Maybe you were on an airplane heading home; or during social distancing you were not permitted to be with your person. Sometimes the death is so gentle that even though you are in the room you haven't noticed your person has stopped breathing.

Often, feelings of guilt are related to a sense of helplessness or a loss of control. For instance, should statements imply that if you had done something differently, there would have been a different outcome – that your different actions could have prevented your person's death. As painful as guilt is, sometimes focusing on what you could have done differently seems better than acknowledging there was nothing you could have done at all. 'Should' statements may be a way of exercising some control when we are feeling extremely vulnerable. Perhaps it would be helpful to make a list of all the things you did for your person and the positive aspects of your relationship, then reflect on that list when guilty feelings occur.

Depending on the nature of your relationship with the person who died and the circumstances of their death, a normal grief-related emotion you may feel is relief. Feeling a sense of relief when someone dies does not make you a bad person. It is not a statement of how much you did or did not love your person. Rather, you feel relieved that their suffering is over and that your pain in witnessing their struggle is also over. This is especially common for caregivers who have witnessed their loved one's suffering and provided care throughout a prolonged illness.

Note: Your feelings of relief may be further complicated if you are a caregiver who has had feelings of anger and resentment throughout your person's illness and decline. It may also be especially difficult if you have been giving care to someone for whom you do not have warm and loving feelings. Perhaps your person has been unappreciative or unkind to you, or has abused you at some time in your life. You may feel relief that the burden of giving care has been removed but also that you do not have to spend time with this person. Regardless of the reason(s) why, it is important to remember that the judgement of others is uninformed, unfair, and inappropriate. No one should try to talk you out of your feelings or comment on a situation that is not their own. In some circumstances it may be more helpful to grieve the person you wish they had been, i.e. I cannot grieve for my mother who was unkind to me all my life so I choose to grieve the mother I should have had.

Natural feelings of relief can also trigger intense guilt. You might think that you should only be feeling sad when someone dies, but grief does not just mean sadness. Grief is a complex mix of emotional reactions, none of which are bad, wrong or inappropriate.

It can be very hard to acknowledge our guilt. Acknowledging guilt can feel like admitting failure and we live in a failure-phobic culture. A perfection-focused environment may have taught you, throughout your lifetime, to conceal perceived mistakes. Striving for perfection works against us in our grieving because no one – not one of us – loves perfectly. Relationships are

complicated and we *all* make mistakes in relationships with those we love.

### *Coping with Guilt*

While you can't go back in time and correct mistakes you've made in the past (real or imagined), you can say you're sorry. Of course, this becomes much more difficult when the person you want to apologize to has died. But you can still express your regrets that you have failed them in a one-way conversation. This can be difficult and painful, but then again, so is holding on to them.

You may also choose to share your guilt with a friend or family member to help let it out. However, it's important to be aware that others may try to talk you out of your feelings in an attempt to help you feel better. At times this might be comforting, but you may wonder if the depth of your guilt and regret has really been heard. When sharing any intense emotion, it's important to choose someone who can just listen and be supportive.

Writing your person a letter could be another way to name feelings of guilt in the grieving process. Or just writing the "shoulds" down might be a good release. Perhaps it would be helpful to focus on wisdom from author Maya Angelou and use it as a mantra. "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better." Or drawn from the wisdom of palliative care staff, "Don't **should** on yourself!"

### **Loneliness**

Loneliness in grief is haunting and brings with it a longing to return to a state of normal that no longer exists.

The loneliness of *being* physically and socially alone is usually what comes to mind when you think of loneliness – having no one to go places with, or spend time with. Eating meals alone and coming home to an empty house. When you're used to spending a lot of time with someone talking to them and just being together, their absence can create a very real and very painful sense of loneliness.

The loneliness of *feeling* alone. It is not just being physically or socially alone that can trigger loneliness – you can be standing in the middle of a crowded room and still feel utterly and completely alone. You might feel you've lost a sense of belonging or connection in the world. This can make you feel terribly lonely, even when you have many people around you who love and care for you.

Your loneliness can make you feel conflicted after someone close to you dies. You might desperately want companionship and company but also need time to be alone and process your loss. For these and many other reasons, feeling lonely is often confusing, uncomfortable, and scary. It is, however, a natural part of grieving and gradually, after time and reflection, you may come to a place where feeling lonely doesn't seem so frightening. In the meantime, what helps us tolerate feelings of loneliness? Here are some suggested coping strategies.

Activities – Some will say they cope with loneliness and grief by keeping busy, i.e. engaging in solo hobbies, activities and interests such as photography, gardening, exercising, cooking, writing, reading, painting, going for

walks, scrapbooking, knitting, working, etc. Such activities can be fulfilling and help you feel productive, which is valuable and important during times of loss. However, excessively throwing yourself into any activity to the exclusion of everything else may be a way of avoiding your feelings altogether.

*Social Time* – Looking for ways to increase contact with others is another way you might deal with loneliness and grief. You can phone friends you haven't chatted with for a while, join a new club, or start volunteering. Spending time with pets can also be considered socialization and you don't have to focus on having a conversation or answering a lot of questions. However, doing social activities when you're lonely may seem overwhelming – creating the conflict of craving contact with others while at the same time avoiding it.

*Distractions* – You might consider distracting yourself from loneliness and grief as accessing a guilty pleasure. There can be much pleasure in watching tv, playing computer games, shopping, having a drink of alcohol, or eating junk food. But these behaviours tend to offer only a temporary escape from loneliness rather than helping to develop more lasting strategies for dealing with your feelings.

Reading about these different types of coping strategies, you might immediately recognize your go-to category of coping. You may also be aware of judgements regarding some of these strategies – particularly the distractions or escape strategies are viewed as bad or wrong.

In moderation, distractions can be quite useful, and in fact can be necessary. Any coping strategy, even the

socially acceptable ones, can outlive their usefulness when it's the only one you're using. In fact, you may need a balance of all of these types of coping strategies - individual activities, social connections, and distractions - to help deal with loneliness and cope with grief.

Remember that coping strategies are intended to help make our feelings more manageable, not make them go away altogether.

### **Sadness**

There are many words that express the sadness, but often none can fully cover the depth of our grief. Sadness can catch you off guard – the emptiness and pain of grief can be a physical ache and cause profound emotional suffering. One of the most difficult things encountered when trying to deal with sadness is getting caught between the pain of remembering the person who died and the fear of forgetting them.

In times of grief, memories of the person who has died can be a comfort and can cause us a great deal of sadness. Remembering the sound of that person's laughter, the way they used to answer the phone, their warm embrace, can make you well up with tears and make you smile all at the same time. Sadness can be triggered by anything around you: events, objects, aromas, or sounds that you associate with the person who died can bring a fresh wave of sorrow, even after you feel your grief is behind you.

Our senses and our bodies hold our emotions. Think of emotions evoked by hearing your favourite song,

butterflies in your stomach when you are nervous, or a stiff neck or shoulders when we cannot express what we would like to. We do that with grief too; we hold it in parts of our body. And when you are active, parts of your body held in tension may relax and feelings are released a little bit.

It may be surprising when this happens, and it is preferable to go with the feeling, rather than bottling it up. It is healthier outside our bodies than inside. Mr. Rogers said, “Anything human is mentionable. Anything mentionable is manageable.”

Frequently, healing is seen as a straight line – you feel bad at first, gradually you feel a bit better, and then eventually you feel fine again. In fact, the sadness of grief may affect you more like the tides. It washes in, and then washes back out repeatedly. Over time, the waves become more manageable.

Sadness is often uncomfortable. Consider the messages conveyed every day from multiple sources encouraging or even insisting on a constant state of happiness. There are magazine articles, TV talk shows, advertisements, and entire self-help industries devoted to obtaining this thing called happiness, and how to hold onto it forever if it is achieved. Collectively, we’ve come to think of happiness as a product we can purchase through positive thinking, healthy living, or acquiring more stuff. Where is there room for grief and sadness in a culture obsessed with happiness?

The result of grieving in the midst of all of these messages is that you may feel like others are impatient if you are

not 100% on the happiness track. Any feelings of sadness can seem like there's something wrong with you – like you're an outcast. Therefore, at times you may feel ashamed of your sadness, as if it were an inconvenience or burden to others. Imagine what it would be like to claim that sadness and wear it as a badge of honour. It may sound strange, but some people talk about the sadness that comes with grief as a sign of great love.

So the coping strategies listed here are not intended to minimize sadness but rather to share ways in which you can create the time, space, and opportunities to allow yourself to feel sad in manageable ways. At certain points in your grieving process, many of these strategies might seem overwhelming. That's fine. They are not mandatory, but merely suggestions to help honour your person with your sadness when and how you decide.

When you miss your person, you might ...

- Cry and let your feelings out.
- Share stories with others about good times with your person.
- Plant a tree in their memory or sponsor a bench in your favourite park.
- Look at pictures and make a collage of your favourites to be framed and hung in your home.
- Talk to someone who understands, who will not try to fix your grief, and who will just listen.
- Visit your person's grave and talk to them about how you are feeling.
- Create a memory book with stories, concert tickets, photos, and other memorabilia.

- Write a letter to your person telling them how much they are missed, offering an overdue apology, telling them about the changes in your life, or, after a time, about how you will move forward.

## **Exhaustion**

Exhaustion is a physical, mental, and an emotional state. Just as your body will get tired from not enough sleep, your mind will become tired from constant emotional strain. In grief, your inner world can be full of chaos and turmoil that you may or may not be consciously aware of. Your physical, mental, and emotional energy gets drained as part of the natural process of making sense of loss.

Additionally, it may take more emotional energy to keep your feelings bottled up than it does to express them. You may feel drained after a good hard cry, but often that sense will pass fairly soon after an emotional release. The pressure to keep yourself together all of the time can in fact contribute to exhaustion. This fatigue can make your limbs feel heavy and can result in lethargy and a lack of motivation to get up and do anything at all.

As much as you might want to just crawl into bed and shut out the world, there is an almost endless list of tasks that need to be done when someone dies. There are arrangements to be made for funerals, institutions that need to be notified; people to call who will want to pay their respects, you may be needed to support other family members. There are certain decisions that need to be made following a death that require our attention and understanding. Dealing with all of these practical

pressures can be difficult at the best of times and near impossible in the midst of grief. The mental energy these tasks require can leave you feeling physically and emotionally drained.

Your exhaustion may affect you mentally as well, leaving you unable to think, reason, or concentrate. You may doubt your sanity as you struggle with even the simplest decision. You may show uncharacteristic poor judgement. Even the smallest additional stress may make you crumble, unable to see the path forward. For some, they are sharp and able to organize and attend to many demands right after their person's death, only to be leveled by mental exhaustion later. Again, this is normal and to be expected.

It may be helpful to go back to the tips on basic self-care in the "Coping with grief: Self-care" section of this booklet. Additionally, here are some guidelines for decision-making that may help when facing the mental challenge of dealing with practical matters that need attention.

### *Tips for Decision Making*

- When overwhelmed by tasks, try to narrow them down to your top three time-sensitive priorities.
- Get more information by asking for others' advice, researching online, or calling an agency or organization that may have additional information or expertise relevant to your questions.
- Remember that there is usually more than one solution to a problem. Consider as many possible

options as you can, identifying the pros and cons of each option.

- Choose a course of action.
- Follow through with the decision – try listing the steps required to reach a certain goal or outcome e.g. Step 1, Step 2, Step 3, etc., and then focus on one step at a time.

Remember that it's okay to ask for help when things get overwhelming and exhausting. We live in a society that encourages us to be independent and do things on our own and that makes asking for help difficult. This philosophy doesn't work so well with grief. It's more likely that you will need a community of caring and compassionate family, friends, neighbours, and service providers who can help you deal with the physical and emotional exhaustion of grief.

### **Searching for peace**

You may find yourself looking for peace and experiencing:

- a longing for harmony and wholeness
- a search for meaning or purpose in life
- a need for connection with other people and the universe

Some people may find solace in nature while others may find it in spirituality. Spirituality may include a religious component characterized as an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols that is shared by a community. Some people live and express their spirituality within an organized religion while others do not belong to a religion but still lead highly spiritual lives. One is not better or more desirable than the other. Grief

can affect you at a spiritual level regardless of how you identify your personal spirituality or religion.

Spirituality can also be about your struggle with the big questions about the nature of existence, the reason for suffering, and our place in the grand scheme of things. You may be asking:

- Why did this have to happen?
- What's the point of anything anymore?
- What happens to us when we die?"
- "What is the meaning of life?"

When grieving, these questions often indicate a search for meaning – an effort to try and make sense of the loss. Some people turn to religious or spiritual faith for comfort, while others may question their faith as the result of a loss. The questions are important, even if they are not easily answered.

Some ways in which you may find meaning include:

- **Story telling** – Sharing memories and stories of your loved one can help you make sense of their life and death as well as your own pain. These stories may include an expression of your shame, pain or grief moving you toward peace and acceptance.
- **Paying attention to the profound** – You may experience meaningful moments in the most ordinary everyday things such as a beautiful sunset, a creative pursuit, or feeling an overall sense of awe and wonder.

- **In relationship with others** – You can also find deeper relationships with others. Your shared grief may bring a newfound appreciation for who they are. You may find meaning and purpose in reaching out to, or helping, others.
- **Engaging in spiritual pursuits** – Spiritual clarity may be found when reading sacred writings, going to church/synagogue/temple/mosque, attending spiritually themed workshops, praying and meditating, or creating the time and space to connect with that which we personally hold sacred.
- **Belonging to a caring community** – Connecting with others in your community, with a group of family, friends, or neighbours, can sometimes help bring some comfort. Lasting connections can be found in caring for vulnerable members of our society and feeling that you have made a difference.

### **Love and gratitude**

Not all of the emotional reactions you will have in grief will be negative or distressing. The deep sadness at losing someone is intimately connected to your love for them. While there is sadness in your heart, feelings of fondness and connection may also be present too. You may experience a memory or hear a story that makes you both well up with tears and smile at the same time.

Another emotion that may surface is gratitude for who the person was and what they meant to you. You may experience a wave of appreciation or affection when thinking about all of the ways your life was touched and enhanced by the person who died.

Positive emotions can catch us off guard during funerals or memorials. With many people coming together who knew the person, the telling of stories or sharing of memories, there may be moments of joy and laughter along with the sadness. While this can be a pleasant way to remember someone, it can also sometimes lead to feelings of unease. When we're grieving, we may feel bad about feeling good.

For a period of time following a death, it may feel like it is wrong to enjoy yourself, even for a moment. Laughter and joy can also trigger sadness when you acknowledge that your person is no longer here to share the good times. Human emotions are complex. It's common to feel two or more seemingly incompatible emotions at the same time.

Feeling good does not mean we miss the person any less. We can practice just noticing and feeling all our emotions without trying to fix or change them.

## **Recognizing when more help is needed**

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In the beginning sections of this booklet it was stated that grief is a normal and necessary reaction to loss. It is normal for grief to be intense, painful, and all-consuming for a period of time. However, this intensity can sometimes linger long after death. It becomes debilitating and can interfere with your daily living. This is referred to as complicated grief – when other issues are making the grieving process more complex than usual. Many factors influence how you might experience grief and cope with your loss. In addition to grieving the loss of your person, you may also be coping with:

- severe depression
- drug and/or alcohol use
- a history of mental illness
- developmental disabilities
- chronic health problems
- a violent or traumatic death
- poverty
- past or present sexual, physical or emotional abuse
- suicidal thoughts, feelings, or plans
- a significant prior loss or series of losses

Complicated grief might include other signs. Although some reactions may be extreme, they can be considered normal especially right after death. Some extreme reactions include:

- excessive use of alcohol and/or other substances
- wishing or planning your own death, e.g. thinking or saying things like, “I wish I could die”, “I would be better off dead”, or “I want to be with my person.”
- lengthy and persistent withdrawal from family, friends or work
- inability to get up in the morning and perform basic self-care tasks.

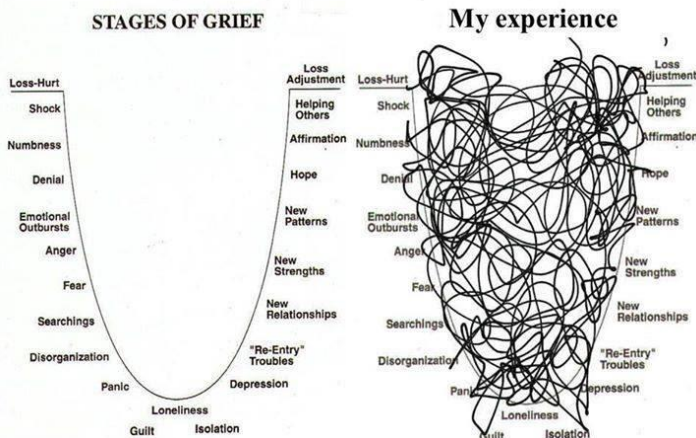
When these reactions persist and/or pose a danger to your own health and safety, it is recommended that you consult with a counsellor or healthcare professional.

## When does grief end?

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One of the most common sources of distress for people who are grieving is that the pain they're experiencing seems endless. It's natural to wonder, "When it will be done?"

There are also many theories and ideas about the endpoint of grief. For instance, you may be familiar with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' 5 Stages of Grief including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. It is understandable that it would be comforting to have a predictable roadmap to follow but that is not a realistic expectation. It may be your hope that progressing through these stages will lead you to the end of your grief. Although Kubler-Ross' work was important as an early theory on grief, we have come to see that it does not explain the breadth of most of our grief experiences.



You may also believe that grief ends within a set period of time – a common time frame is one year. There can be an implied or stated expectation that you should be “over it” about a year after your person’s death.

Still others might think of an ending to grief in terms of “closure”. You may have been told that closure is an emotional resolution to a difficult event.

We can tell you with confidence that your grief is unique to you and should not be compared with anyone else’s experience. There are a number of circumstances that can affect the length and intensity of grief.

- Your relationship to the deceased
- Your adult and childhood experiences with loss
- Your level of material (financial), practical and emotional dependency on the deceased
- Your age and gender
- The type of death (sudden or prolonged, peaceful or violent)
- The condition of the body (disfigured)
- The quality of your relationship to your person just prior to their death
- The perceived need to hide your feelings from others
- The level of social support you receive
- Your religious and/or spiritual beliefs
- Whether you have experienced a prior significant loss or series of losses

The idea of an endpoint to grief may be misleading. Grief most certainly ebbs and flows – it changes and shifts with

time and with reflection – but it might be something you always carry with you. The reality is that missing the person who died, thinking about them, and caring about them will likely never really leave you. Those feelings can, and often do, lessen in intensity over time, but your feelings for your person don't disappear. When someone dies they are no longer physically present, but your relationship with them continues on.

Grief is the road you travel to develop a new type of relationship with them – a relationship made of memories. As time goes on, you may be able to draw some comfort from knowing that your memories and your grief are necessary and important. They are, in fact, a profound tribute to how your person touched your life.

## Imagining your grief

Imagine three glass jars – one small, one medium-sized, and one large. Take one ball, exactly the size of the smallest jar.

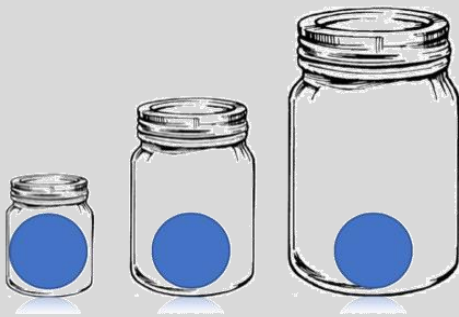
Now stuff it into the small jar. You can barely squeeze it in. This is the way grief feels to most people. It fills everything and there is no room for anything else. Grief has taken over all the available emotional space in your world leaving no room for anything else. It is so large it even makes breathing difficult.

As time goes by, you may be able to put that same ball in the medium-sized jar. There is more room around the ball and it is not taking up all the space in the jar. It's still a big presence but there is more space for other thoughts and feelings.

Finally, put the ball in the largest jar. It fits easily with lots of room to spare. It is not difficult to manage grief within the space of the large jar.

As painful as it is, many people do not want to stop grieving. They feel it will sever their final tie with their person who has died. Their relationship with their person still has great value and they don't want to forget.

The ball (your grief) has not changed its size or shape. It will always be present and cannot be erased or ignored. But the jar has gotten larger to accommodate your grief within a whole and balanced life.



Adapted from *Grieving: A Beginner's Guide* by Jerusha Hull McCormack

## Resources

### About Us

Colchester East Hants Hospice Society is a charitable community organization dedicated to providing a safe and accessible space for those in our communities to Understand and navigate grief.

Our team is here to help and can be reached at:

902-893-3265

[www.cehhospice.org](http://www.cehhospice.org)

[info@cehhospice.org](mailto:info@cehhospice.org)

Some days the waves are small.  
Some days the waves are big.  
All you can do is learn to swim.



Hope & Understanding for the Grieving

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