

GRIEF AND LOSS

Grieving is the natural process of emotional and life adjustment you go through after a loss. Major life changes such as chronic pain can trigger grief and the associated feelings. It is common with chronic pain for people to experience multiple losses in a short period of time. For example, through the experience of pain, you may be grieving past abilities, loss of independence, previous hobbies, loss of employment, of hopes and plans for the future, and so on, successively or all at once. This is what is referred to as **‘compounded grief’**. Grief associated with chronic pain can also be difficult for others to recognize, understand, or validate. Loss or changes that are not publicly acknowledged is referred to as **‘disenfranchised grief’**. These unique features of grieving as a person living with pain can make it challenging to process the grief. However, you are not alone. The following support tools and resources may help you.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Everyone reacts to grief and loss differently. The following information from the Family Caregivers of BC touches on some of what might be expected during the grieving process:

It is not unusual for people to experience grief reactions...

- in different ways, at different times
- that show up in all spheres of life: psychological, social, physical, spiritual
- that involve a wide variety of thoughts and feelings; some expected, some not expected
- that vary depending on how the losses or changes are perceived

It is not unusual to feel...

- a combination of anger and depression: e.g. irritability, frustration, annoyance, intolerance
- guilt in some form
- a lack of self-concern or self-esteem
- spasms of acute upsurges of grief that occur without warning
- unsure in making decisions, vague, forgetful
- preoccupied or obsessed with the illness
- overwhelmed, confused
- fatigued by amount of energy required to deal with changes and losses It is not unusual to...
- question personal beliefs and the meaning or purpose of life

- feel a burden to family or friends
- mourn the loss of hopes, dreams and unfulfilled expectations

It is not unusual to experience...

- different reactions to others, individually and in social situations, e.g. withdraw from or respond inappropriately to others
- unrealistic expectations from others about a variety of things: e.g. your coping skills, attitudes or behaviours

THE STAGES OF GRIEF

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross created a model of grief/loss that can help to describe the experience of any significant loss in our lives. Knowing the stages can be helpful in identifying where you are at and might also help guide you forward on the path to healing the emotional aspects of the loss associated with living with chronic pain.

It's important to note that grief is not a linear process; you might find yourself moving in and out of stages in a different order and re-experiencing some stages over again. You may also notice that grief may return or shift while living with chronic pain. **This is normal. Grief is not a one-time process; it can evolve throughout life as things change.**

Examples of how these stages might show up are:

- **Denial:** Pushing through, trying to carry on as before.
- **Anger:** At doctors, at self, at family and friends, or at a spiritual figure.
- **Bargaining:** "If you make me well, I'll..." (fill in the blank, e.g. be a better person).
- **Depression:** Feeling the sadness and loss of health, work, relationships, activities, or even hope, as you knew them.
- **Acceptance:** Learning to live alongside pain and loss. Note: Acceptance doesn't mean giving up. It means accepting what the situation is *right now* and being willing to look for ways to manage within it.

HOW DO YOU PRACTICE SELF-CARE IN TIMES OF GRIEF

Grieving fully can help you move forward with life with more ease and wellness. However, grieving can also disrupt your ability to cope with daily activities and interfere with how you manage your pain. Therefore, it can be helpful to consider ways in which you can support yourself to grieve in a healthy way.

Some suggestions for ways of supporting yourself through the process of grieving:

- Recognize and express emotions. For example, use a journal or art to express how you are feeling. Find a way of bringing ritual to the process of grieving, for example writing feelings on paper and ripping up the paper.
- Identify a good friend, family member, support group or counsellor with whom you can share how you are feeling (see next section about supports).
- Understanding grief and know that others experience similar responses.
- Be gentle and compassionate with yourself.

Although grief is a universal experience, the way we process, express, and cope with the loss can vary widely across cultures, faith, and communities. As such, you may consider incorporating cultural or spiritual practices into your grieving process such as prayer, rituals, storytelling, connection with nature, or time in silence.

FIND SUPPORT

Support from others can be helpful when managing grief. Due to not understanding your loss, some people may not be able to provide the understanding and caring that you expected from them. Because the relationships in your life will likely be altered in some way after loss, it is normal to look at, change, and add to your support network. You may find that the company of others who are living through chronic pain helpful. Please see below list of supports you may find helpful during your grieving journey:

- [BC Bereavement Help Line](tel:1-877-779-2223): 1-877-779-2223
- [Pain Support Line](tel:1-833-261-7246): 1-833-261-7246
- Pain Support and Wellness Groups: painbc.ca/supportgroups
- [Living Through Loss Counselling Society of BC](tel:778-931-5013): 778-931-5013
- For your loved ones, family, and friend caregivers, the [Caregiver Support Line](tel:1-877-520-3267): 1-877-520-3267
- Connect with a spiritual leader and/or Elder

It's important to note that grief and depression are different. Even when you're in the middle of the grieving process, you can still experience pleasure or happiness in your life. With depression, there are far fewer good days and there may be a lack of emotion, or feelings of despair that are far more constant. You may also find that grief or loss may trigger old losses and traumas. If you notice symptoms of depression or feel re-triggered, this might be a good time to consider getting the support of a counsellor, healthcare provider, spiritual leader, and/or Elder. For mental health support, you may consider contacting the following:

- Suicide Crisis Helpline: 9-8-8 or 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)
- BC Mental Health Support Line: 310-6789 (no area code)
- HealthLink BC: 8-1-1
- Alcohol & Drug Information & Referral Service: 1-800-663-1441
- [KUU-US Crisis Response Service](#) (for Indigenous, Metis and Inuit people): 1-800-588-8717
- [Hope For Wellness](#) (for Indigenous, Metis and Inuit people): 1-855-242-3310

RESOURCES

- Ten Things to Know About Grief: bcbh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Ten-Things-to-Know-About-Grief.pdf
- Dealing with Grief: A Guide to Understanding Your Reactions: bcbh.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/1529007551_Dealing-with-Grief.pdf
- Mindfulness and Self-Compassion, Pain Waves Podcast: liveplanbe.ca/pain-education/mind-body-techniques/mindfulness-and-self-compassion
- Chronic Pain, Anger and Grief: liveplanbe.ca/pain-education/emotional-well-being/chronic-pain-anger-and-grief
- Pain and Me: Tamar Pincus talks about chronic pain, acceptance and commitment: youtube.com/watch?v=ZUXPqphwp2U&t=83s
- Grief and Grieving, HealthLink BC: healthlinkbc.ca/healthwise/grief-and-grieving
- Illness and Grief: What to Expect: familycaregiversbc.ca/caregiver-learning-center/read-resources/illness-and-grief-what-to-expect
- Eight Myths about Grief: familycaregiversbc.ca/eight-myths-about-grief
- You may consider referencing the following book at your local library: centerforloss.com/bookstore/chronic-illness-grief

Developed in collaboration with

[**British Columbia Bereavement Helpline**](#) and [**Family Caregivers of BC**](#)

