

LOSING A LOVED ONE

Understanding **GRIEF**



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

You've lost a loved one to blood cancer; this fact sheet will help you learn:

- What grief is
- Responses to grief
- How to cope with grief
- Why it's important
- Types of grief



What is grief?

Grief is a complex and deeply personal experience. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.

Culture and society influence how we grieve. For example, how long the mourning period is considered 'acceptable,' or how 'appropriate' it is to grieve in public, is different among different countries and generations. Add to that a common discomfort with talking about death, and it can be challenging to understand grief.

Grief is not a one-way tunnel or a straight line. The 5 well-known stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) are a theory. You may go through the stages in a different order, or you may repeat or not experience certain stages.

You may be asked if you are 'back to normal' or have "moved on" after your loved one dies. Even the common idea of 'closure' puts pressure on the grieving person. You do not have to hurry your grieving process, also known as the mourning period.

In fact, it is normal to grieve the loss of your loved one the rest of your life, although the ways you grieve and the intensity of grief will change over time.

Why is grieving important?

Grief, though often painful, plays a crucial role in emotional health. Allowing yourself to feel and process grief is essential for healing. Suppressed grief can lead to emotional complications. Expressing and accepting your grief can pave the way for recovery and growth. Understanding the importance of experiencing grief can help you navigate through it in a healthy and constructive manner.



Responses to grief

Grief affects us not just emotionally, but physically, socially and behaviourally.

Physical responses can include:

- Changes in sleep patterns
- Changes in appetite
- Fatigue or lack of energy
- Bodily aches or pains
- Increased susceptibility to illnesses

Emotional responses can include:

- Feelings of sadness or depression
- Anger or irritability
- Anxiety or nervousness
- Guilt or remorse
- Feelings of numbness or detachment
- Changes in personal beliefs/spirituality

Social responses can include:

- Withdrawal from social activities
- Difficulty in maintaining relationships
- Feeling disconnected from others
- Overdependence on certain relationships
- Changes in communication patterns

Behavioural responses can include:

- Decreased productivity at work or school
- Avoidance of reminders of the loss
- Changes in hobbies or interests
- Neglect of personal responsibilities
- Increased use of substances (alcohol, nicotine, etc.)

Types of grief

Grief comes in various forms – before, during and after the loss of a loved one.

Anticipatory grief

Anticipatory grief is when people grieve as their loved one gets sicker, before they die, when they may start to imagine and fear a life without them. It is a common experience and can be just as intense and difficult as grief that occurs after the loss of a loved one. Anticipatory grief can be a lonely experience; it can be difficult for others to understand what you're going through. It can manifest in sadness, anxiety, guilt, anger, and fear. You may experience a sense of detachment from loved ones or a feeling of numbness.

Acute grief

This type of grief is often the initial, intense phase following the loss of a loved one. Strong emotional responses are common, such as profound sadness, shock, disbelief, or even numbness. Acute grief is the mind and body's immediate reaction. You may experience disruption in daily functioning, including eating and sleeping, and an overwhelming preoccupation with the loss of your loved one.

Complicated grief

Also known as prolonged grief disorder, complicated grief is where individuals find it challenging to move forward with their lives and can interfere with activities of daily living. Symptoms may include persistent longing or yearning for the lost person, difficulty engaging in life, feelings of emptiness or meaninglessness, and intense sorrow that doesn't seem to improve with time.

Integrated grief

Integrated grief is when you have found a way to continue living a meaningful life – integrating the loss into your life and finding a way to memorialize or honour the lost person while engaging in life. Integrated grief doesn't mean an absence of pain. It indicates a balance between remembering the lost loved one and embracing life.



"Is this our last family meal with Dad?"

Laura Martire knows firsthand about anticipatory grief. She was her late father Joe's primary caregiver throughout his leukemia experience. During his treatment, Laura says "in the back of my mind there was this awful feeling of, 'how many more of these [family dinners] might we have? There was this sick feeling in my stomach that this will probably be our last with him.'" Read the whole story in *The Globe and Mail*.



Grief bursts

You may notice that grief doesn't affect you in a predictable manner or with logical timing. (Just when you are having several good days in a row, you'll suddenly have a bad day.) That's because there is an important concept in grieving known as a subsequent temporary upsurge of grief (STUG) – or 'bursts' of grief. You may expect some grief bursts and try to prepare for them, while others you might not expect and feel unprepared for. STUGs can be:

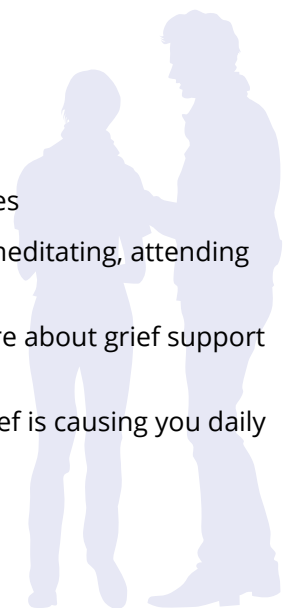
- Cyclic: bursts happen at intervals throughout the year (birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, etc.)
- Linear: milestones (graduation, wedding, birth of child, retirement, etc.)
- Stimulus-related: Some sight, smell or sound reminds you of your loved one.

Coping with grief

Some people may want to talk about their grief with family and friends to help them process their feelings, share memories of their loved one, and relate to grief experiences. Other individuals don't want to talk about their grief, at least not at first and not with many people. They may prefer to wait, or to talk with a professional, such as a therapist, or with people outside their family and social circle such as a grief support group.

Coping strategies can include:

- Eat well and get enough sleep/rest
- Join a virtual or in-person support group for grieving people
- Read or listen (podcasts) to stories of other people who've lost loved ones
- Engage in whatever brings you peace and satisfaction – whether that's meditating, attending church, doing yoga or woodworking
- Reach out to the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society of Canada to learn more about grief support resources available in your community.
- Talk to your doctor about seeing a mental health professional if your grief is causing you daily struggle.





Grief resources

There are websites, apps, podcasts, videos, online learning, and discussion forums focused on grief. Canadian Virtual Hospice has a collection of websites covering a wide range of topics. They include:

[MyGrief.ca](#)

Extensive collection of self-directed learning modules, such as a relationship series: death of spouse/partner; child; sibling; (grand)parent; friend; coworker; pregnancy and infant loss series; grief in 2SLGBTQ+ communities; grief after trauma, suicide, related to substance abuse, Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD), and more.

[KidsGrief.ca](#)

Talking with kids and teens about serious illness, dying and death. Tools for parents, and for educators.

[LivingmyCulture.ca](#)

Canadians from various cultures (Indigenous, Chinese, Ethiopian, Indian, Iranian, Italian, and more) share their stories and wisdom about living with serious illness, end of life and grief to support other.

[Actively Moving Forward](#)

A network for grieving young adults. Includes facilitated virtual support groups and the AMF App.

LLSC gratefully acknowledges the following for their important contributions to this publication:

Laura Martire for sharing her lived experience with anticipatory grief, as told to a Globe and Mail writer for Blood Cancer Awareness Month (September) 2023.

C. Elizabeth Dougherty B.S.W, M.S.W, R.S.W Palliative Care Psychosocial Clinician and Educator, C. Elizabeth Dougherty Consulting.

Danielle Imbeault, International Grief Literacy Project, 2024



LEUKEMIA &
LYMPHOMA
SOCIETY OF
CANADA®

Never hesitate to contact us, we're here to help!

1 833 222-4884 • info@bloodcancers.ca • bloodcancers.ca