

Grief

The profound sadness known as grief can happen at any time on the brain tumour journey. Trauma in the brain often causes cognitive deficits and personality changes. This may lead to a deep, sudden mourning for “the person who used to be.”

Early in your journey, you could be grieving for your own lost sense of self, and see a similar emotional response mirrored when you connect with loved ones. That can be hard to handle.

They could be dealing with “anticipatory grief” and it can happen at any stage -- diagnosis, treatment, recovery, or during the process of dying and death.

No one grieves the same way. There is no “right way.” The stages of grief will be unique to each person and their roles within a brain tumour journey¹.

What does it feel like ?

Grief can feel like a tidal wave of emotions at varying times and varying intensity. Feelings can include pain, loss, emptiness, sorrow, bitterness, denial, numbness, detachment, and a loss of meaning in life².

On the flipside: Grief can also bring out feelings of humour and positive emotions from the memories³.

All our emotions show up in the body, and grief takes a heavy toll. It can feel like a bad flu. You may be struck with extreme fatigue, chills up the spine, adrenaline surges, headaches, nausea or a weakened immune system⁴.

Research shows that grief is linked to increased levels of inflammation in the body, which can lead to cardiovascular problems⁵.

This resource is not intended as a substitute for medical advice. The reader should regularly consult their health care provider in matters relating to their health especially about any symptoms that may need diagnosis or medical attention.



What it is

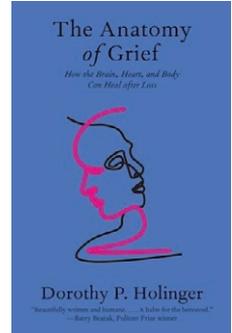
Grief is the internal response to loss or anticipated loss. The physiological responses to grief affect brain activity in the prefrontal lobe and limbic system. Here's how it works through the body, according to psychologist Dorothy P. Hollinger⁶.

The prefrontal lobe plays a key role in planning and decision making. This happens as the prefrontal lobe processes emotions and memories.

The limbic system works with the prefrontal lobe in what is called the fronto-limbic system. This system is responsible for remembering experiences and the emotions associated with lived events. Emotions of grief can be short-term or long-term in the brain. That means they could arise months or even years later after a loss.

The emotions seem to come out of nowhere and be expressed as anger or denial. That would be an overflow of emotions experienced in our subconscious mind. The grieving brain does everything it can to maintain balance and emotional regulation.

The survival instinct within this part of the brain causes us to freeze after a significant loss. Hollinger's book explains "why grief surges and ebbs so persistently." She provides artful examples of how language and clarity of thought become elusive as the brain goes into this survival mode⁶.





Stepping forward

1) Take your time

Grief often arrives with a sense of denial. There is no right way or timeframe to deal with loss. Your experience is unique, so be kind to yourself and others in a brain tumour journey⁸.

2) Find or create a support system

Humans aren't meant to grieve alone. Find community support systems centered on brain tumour patients, survivors, and caregivers. These connections help people acknowledge loss and share experiences⁷.

3) Understand your grieving journey

You've probably heard about the five stages of grief? (Denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance). Did you get unwanted advice about the timeframe for a healthy mourning period? Please take others' advice with the grain of salt, knowing that each person will grieve in their own unique time and way¹.



Supporting someone with Grief

Grief support has drastically changed since the onset of COVID-19 pandemic. In-person support might be limited. But humans have adapted to Zoom groups and other online hangouts. The formal support systems for grief (at brain tumour groups, cancer centres or community centres) might be best for you. Even informally, chat with strangers at a local botanical garden or on a stroll in a nearby park, and you are likely to find someone else dealing with deep loss.

It is vital to maintain a sense of community and connection to support in order to acknowledge the loss or anticipated loss experienced⁷.

From trained mental health workers in a clinical setting, you are likely to receive relevant advice such as:

- maintaining family and friend contacts
- nutrition advice, sleep tips and other forms of self-care
- information relevant to brain tumour patients, survivors, and caregivers⁷.



Resources

Canadian Psychological Association (Fact Sheet):

https://cpa.ca/docs/File/Publications/FactSheets/FS_GriefInAdults_EN_2019.pdf

Grief and loss coaching:

<https://wellnesstogether.ca/en-CA/grief-and-loss-coaching/>

Grief & Bereavement (Website):

<https://brainstrust.org.uk/brain-tumour-support/navigating-your-pathway/grief-bereavement/>

Podcast:

<https://podcasts.apple.com/ie/podcast/grief-is-my-side-hustle/id1568936089>

References

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Carefully curated by individuals affected by brain tumours for individuals affected by brain tumours with sound scientific background on topics that are important to us.

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