

The Physical Side of Grief

Zusman Hospice Bereavement Support



Grief is an emotionally intense journey, and it is also a very physical experience for most people. Even when the death is expected, grief may strike with the force of a physical blow, leaving us shaken emotionally and physically. Many caregivers push themselves physically leading up to a death and are now feeling the effects of that. Most caregivers, even with the best of help, lost sleep, ate erratically and did more heavy lifting than usual. Caregivers may have skipped routine health checks, screenings and follow-up visits for existing health problems of their own. After a death, many caregivers admit they just don't know how they did it—that they were running on sheer willpower or adrenaline. They find that they don't realize how deeply fatigued they are until after the end of their loved one's illness.

Don't expect fatigue to disappear overnight. Sleep problems are common during bereavement and may complicate attempts to catch up on rest.

Most of us have areas of our bodies that act up under stress. Some get headaches or stomachaches; others have muscle pains or intestinal problems. During bereavement, these vulnerable areas are likely to reflect stress levels, and grieving people may develop other physical discomforts.

Typical physical reactions to grief:

- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Shortness of breath
- Breathlessness
- Dry mouth
- Tightness in the throat
- Heaviness in chest
- Nausea
- Changes in appetite
- Stomachaches
- Hollowness in stomach
- Intestinal problems
- Fatigue
- Muscle tension and pain
- More accident prone
- Weakened immune system
- Changes in sleep pattern
- Oversensitive to stimuli, especially noise

Increased concern about individual health and the health of other family members is normal. Losing someone close brings up feelings of physical vulnerability. There may be a period when grieving people worry excessively about every little bump or cough. A physical exam to assess the physical impact of stress and to relieve fears is always a sound idea.

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