

# How grief affect your health

Weakened immune system

Heart problems

Alcohol and substance abuse

Depression

Poor sleep

When to seek help to overcome grief?

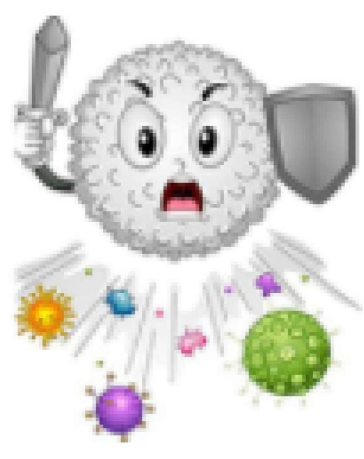
Working with Your healthcare provider

References

## Weakened immune system

Your immune system is a complex network of cells, tissues, and organs that work together to defend against germs. It protects your body against foreign invaders that can make you sick.<sup>1</sup> The experience of grief can impact the immune system for e.g. event often accompanied by grief after the loss of someone close has numerous consequences for physical and mental health leading to a weakened immune system.<sup>2</sup>

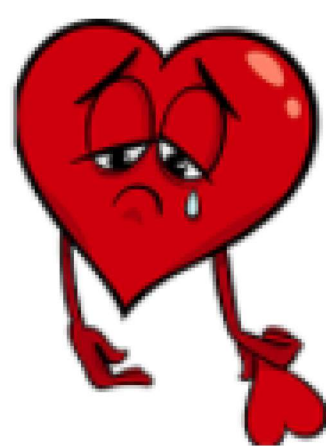
A weakened immune system may also lead to illness and infections.<sup>2</sup>



## Heart problems

Acute psychological stress is associated with an abrupt increase in the risk of cardiovascular events. A study observed that a person's risk of having a heart attack was 21 times more likely in the first 24 hours after the death of a significant other. After 1 week, the risk was still almost 6 times as likely. The impact may be greatest among individuals at high cardiovascular risk.<sup>3</sup>

Stressful life events, such as death of a loved one or divorce, may also lead to a medical condition referred to as Broken Heart Syndrome. This is a short-term heart condition in which the heart does not pump normally and can occur in healthy people also. Symptoms include sudden, intense chest pain and shortness of breath. The pain is often so severe that it may be mistaken for a heart attack. Broken Heart Syndrome can cause short-term heart muscle failure, but is usually treatable.<sup>4</sup>



## Alcohol and substance abuse

Parental loss has an overall impact on the functional impairment in the youth. A study that included 235 sons and daughters who had lost a parent showed that they had about a 2.4 times higher risk for alcohol and substance abuse compared to sons and daughters who had not lost a parent.<sup>5</sup>



## Depression

There is an increased risk for adverse psychiatric events, namely, depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), after the loss of a parent, sibling, or close friend.<sup>5</sup>

A study found that about 1 in every 4 widows and widowers experience clinical depression during the first year after their spouse's death.<sup>6</sup>



## Poor sleep

Many studies showed that people dealing with grief had trouble falling asleep and staying asleep. This was the case whether the individual was depressed or not. Sleep disturbance is common in individuals experiencing grief and may lead to poor physical and mental health outcomes.<sup>7</sup>



## When to seek help to overcome grief?

Sometimes grief can interfere with a person's ability to function in his or her daily life (known as complicated grief). Consider talking with your healthcare provider if you continue to:<sup>8</sup>

- Have trouble carrying out your normal routines
- No longer want to participate in social activities
- Feel depressed or deeply sad
- Blame yourself or feel guilty
- Believe that you did something wrong or could have prevented the death
- Feel like you have lost your sense of purpose in life
- Feel life isn't worth living anymore



## Working with Your healthcare provider

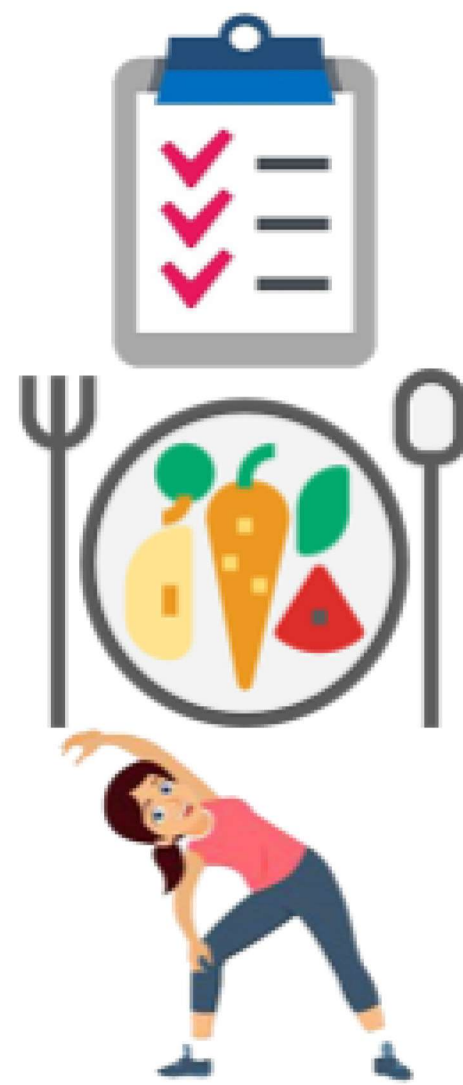
Grief after the loss of a loved one is normal, and the grieving process may take some time. If you decide that you need help overcoming your grief, reach out to your doctor or mental health professional for support. Treatment with psychotherapy or medicines may be recommended in persons who have complicated grief.

It can be helpful to prepare for your appointments ahead of time. Start by making a list of:<sup>8</sup>

- Symptoms you have been experiencing and for how long (e.g., fatigue, depression, changes in appetite)
- Information about any additional major stress or health changes since the loss of your loved one
- Your medical history
- The medicines, vitamins, and supplements you are taking, including over-the-counter products
- Questions you would like to ask your doctor

Although it is important to get professional treatment for complicated grief, these strategies also may help you cope:<sup>8</sup>

- Sticking to your treatment plan
- Eating healthy foods and getting enough rest
- Learning a new skill
- Joining a support group
- Getting regular exercise
- Practicing stress management



## References

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