



THE PHYSICAL SIDE OF GRIEF

Grief is an emotionally intense journey, and it is also a very physical experience for most grieving persons. Even when the death is expected, grief may strike with the force of a physical blow, leaving us shaken emotionally and physically. Many caregivers pushed themselves physically and now are 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. Many caregivers admit afterwards that they just did not 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 persons may develop other physical discomforts.

TYPICAL PHYSICAL REACTIONS TO GRIEF:

Headaches	Shortness of breath	Skin problems
Fatigue	Tightness in the throat	Heaviness in chest
Dizziness	More accident prone	Intestinal problems
Nausea	Weakness in muscles	Hollowness in stomach
Dry mouth	Changes in appetite	Over-sensitive to stimuli
Stomachaches	Changes in sleep pattern	Weakened immune system

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 persons 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.

When the loss occurs through an accident or violent act, there may be increased concerns about safety. The individual may perceive the world as a dangerous place and will worry when a family member is out of sight or late returning home. The sound of a siren may cause feelings of panic.

Because survivors are often fatigued and distracted during bereavement, they tend to be slightly more accident prone and need to be particularly careful to pay attention when driving or performing other tasks that require complete concentration.

Survivors may need to remind themselves to take time for self care. Many caregivers have made someone else top priority for so long that they automatically put their own needs on the back burner. It's time to re-focus and ask, "What is my body telling me about its needs for food, rest and exercise?"

Kansas City Hospice, underwritten by Prime Health Foundation, developed this handout.