

PHYSICAL GRIEF

When we think about loss and grief, we tend to think only of the emotions or feelings. It is important to understand that there are very often physical reasons that we are feeling or reacting the way we are.

To better understand what is happening to us both emotionally and physically when we are grieving, it is helpful for us to know a little more about how our bodies function under stress. This will enable us to take better care of ourselves and hopefully to prevent serious problems.

Since the loss of your loved one, have you experienced a loss of appetite or a sudden increase in appetite? Have you felt depressed and confused? Have there been times when your heart felt like it was racing, or you were short of breath? These reactions, along with many others, are very normal reactions to your loss. They are your body's attempt to get things back in balance, back to some level of equilibrium.



What is happening to you?

Whenever we go through a major change in our lives, it creates a great deal of stress. Our bodies react to that stress to prepare us to face what is ahead. This reaction is part of our very basic inborn instinct to survive. It happens automatically and involves many physical changes within our bodies. The physical changes that occur are responsible for many of the feelings and reactions that we have and believe to be purely emotional.

Let's look more closely at stress and our basic instinct for survival which is called "fight or flight" response. The "fight or flight" response triggers many automatic changes in our body. It is these physical changes that are responsible for many feelings and reactions that we may be having. Think about a time when you were frightened or startled suddenly. Your heart began to race, your hands became cold and stiff, the hair on your arms stood up, your senses became very keen, and your breathing became very deep. All these changes occurred automatically as your body was preparing to fight off the threat, whether imagined or real.



When that threat or need to adapt occurred, many things began to happen in your internal system. The production of adrenalin and noradrenalin (which are the chemicals that arouse us to action) were produced by the nervous system and this caused your heart rate to increase. Blood flow to the muscles sped up and this increased the amount of oxygen, nutrients, and energy getting to the deep muscles. As the muscles received more blood, they began to tighten, and your breathing became deeper to help you reserve oxygen for strength. The blood vessels on the surface of the skin became smaller or close up. This happens to prevent excessive bleeding if you are hurt by the threat. This is also what makes your hands feel cold and clammy. This all happened spontaneously within a matter of seconds to prepare you to meet the threat. These same chemical reactions occur every time your body is called upon to adapt to a change.

The loss of a loved one is a major change in our lives and our grief involves not one, but many changes. We face changes in roles and responsibilities. Each of these roles and responsibilities contribute to our sense of identity and sense of self. Our emotional security is compromised. We begin to feel very unstable and our stress is compounded. Our body tries to handle that too. To help us readjust, our body produces chemicals and hormones which are meant to help us readjust and return to a level of balance. Our body goes through a stage of resistance. This period is longer because the chemical and hormonal changes occur over time, some being released immediately, and others taking as long as 6 to 8 weeks to come about. During the stage of resistance, ACTH (Adrenocorticotrophic Hormone) is released by the pituitary gland, which is the gland that controls our growth and development. The ACTH stimulates the production of Aldosterone which causes salt to be absorbed in the kidneys. This can lead to a rise in blood pressure, water retention, and sometimes shortness of breath. This can cause us to feel flushed, dizzy, and have headaches. It becomes important to watch salt intake and drink plenty of water. ACTH also enhances the production of Cortisol which causes increased sugar levels in the blood.

Our body cannot handle the excess sugar in our system which leads us to feel anxious and excited. Cortisol also causes fat, protein, and vitamin B complex to break down. When this happens, our energy level drops and muscles become weaker. The immune system begins to weaken, and this makes us more susceptible to infections. We tend to catch more colds and flu bugs. You may notice that you are catching everything that is going around. This is a signal that you need to do something to reduce your stress and take better care of yourself. ACTH is also responsible for the production of Thyroxin, which is released by the thyroid gland. Thyroxin causes increased metabolism which is the rate at which chemical processes take place and fuel is burned within the body. This causes changes in our oxygen consumption, increases the rate and depth we breathe, and puts added stress on the cardiac system. Thyroxin increases the digestive activity and production of gastric juices. It is important to remember that we are unique individuals and that our bodies function very differently. For some of us, increased gastric juices or acids will cause feelings of nausea and not wanting to eat at all. We may even have bouts of unexplained diarrhea.



Thyroxin also causes anxiety, confusion, insomnia, as well as feelings of suspicion and dejection. It also causes muscle tremors and weakness. Those times when you felt like you could not shut off your mind and felt worried and excited at the same time weren't just emotional feelings but were a result of increased levels of thyroxin in your system. They are part of a very physical process that is responsible for a lot of normal grief reactions such as nervousness, sleep difficulties, and exhaustion, to name a few.

It is important to remember that these changes can last from a few minutes to several months because the chemical changes occur over time and occur each time we are faced with doing something we haven't done before. This can have a snowball effect which causes a build-up of hormones and continued weakness of the immune system which could lead to serious physical problems.

What Can You Do?

Knowing this you can begin to take better care of yourself. Express your feelings; don't hold them in. Getting your feelings out in the open releases the tension valve and helps you define alternatives and find insights into yourself that will help you begin to adjust.

- It is important for you to get 6-8 hours of sleep or rest. Sleep and rest give us more energy to help us face what is ahead. If you are having trouble sleeping, try some relaxation techniques such as deep breathing exercises, tensing and relaxing your muscles, imagining yourself in a peaceful, quiet place.
- It is important to eat well-balanced meals. Proper nutrition prevents the breakdown of muscle tissue and builds up the immune system.
- EXERCISE! Exercise helps to cleanse the system. It also helps us feel better about ourselves.
- Reorganize your day to reduce stress. Set priorities and make lists. Delegate responsibilities.
- Plan time for relaxation and enjoyment. Do something fun. Take time for yourself.

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