

Grieving and Taking Care of Yourself

How to meet basic needs: nutrition, rest and exercise

After profound losses, bereaved people are often told, "Take care of yourself." People who say that mean well, but what does it mean? What should people do to take care of themselves when they're bereaved? And how can grieving people care for themselves when they're feeling such intense pain and have so little energy?

Grieving people may need to withdraw temporarily: To reflect on the loss and examine the new situation they find themselves in. But it's also necessary to recharge their batteries for what's to come. And that means focusing on some of our most basic needs¹:

- Hydration
- Nutrition
- Rest
- Exercise

Getting enough of these essentials can be especially challenging for people who are grieving.

It's also important for bereaved people to recognize that focusing on physical health isn't selfish or indulgent. It's an essential part of preparing to move forward in healthy living and loving. Bereaved people should feel comfortable taking a little extra time for themselves or indulging in occasional special treats.

Here are some strategies for maintaining physical health during a time of grief. We've also suggested ways loved ones and friends can help.

Hydration

Dehydration is a special danger for bereaved people because the shock of their losses often leaves them stunned, powerless to focus on their needs, and without the energy to carry out any plans. And they're more susceptible to dehydration as they cry and perspire.

Sadly, some bereaved people compound these problems by drinking too much alcohol, which acts as a dehydrating agent. Similarly, coffee and tea, while not harmful in moderate amounts, can contribute to dehydration by increasing urination. And the caffeine they contain can jangle already-disturbed nerves and cause insomnia. Soft drinks, too, often contain caffeine and large amounts of sugar.

What bereaved people can do: Drink lots of water and other healthy fluids. Aim for eight, eight-ounce glasses a day. Fill a jug or a bottle and keep it cold. Slices of lemon or lime add flavor and can make it more refreshing. Buy bottled water and keep it handy: in your briefcase, in your car, on your bedside table.

How friends or loved ones can help: Offer water when you're visiting. Buy them some bottled water to keep in the fridge. If the opportunity arises, gently point out that dehydration can make them feel worse and note how caffeine and alcohol can be depleting. Suggest an activity other than drinking alcohol, or drink alcohol only moderately when you're out together.

¹ Behavioral Health Newsline, Posted February 4, 2002

Nutrition

After a significant loss, bereaved people often fail to eat well – it's difficult to plan and prepare healthy meals. Some experience loss of appetite. Others find that food looks unappetizing, especially in large servings. It may seem enough just to peck at whatever food happens to be available. The burdens of shopping, planning meals, preparing them and taking time to eat may seem overwhelming.

That's one reason why so many religious and cultural groups have traditions of bringing food to people who are mourning or preparing a meal to follow the funeral. "Funeral food" is typically attractive, easy to serve, store and eat later.

Bereaved people are already working hard to cope with their losses. They need the energy provided by nutritious food. They also need a well-balanced diet – emphasizing foods like fruits and vegetables without excess calories, fat and sugar, which is typical of comfort foods and fast foods.

What bereaved people can do: Attend to your nutritional needs by trying to eat well. Perhaps it would help to switch from three large meals each day to six smaller servings. Smaller portions might be more appealing and wouldn't require the effort it takes to make a full-fledged meal.

If you have friends nearby, accept nourishing foods that they prepare for you. If they ask what else can they do, welcome their help in grocery shopping. Don't feel awkward about asking for this type of help. Many friends will be happy to respond to your specific needs.

For a change in your routine or to get out of the house, invite a friend to share a healthy meal with you at a restaurant.

How friends or loved ones can help: Instead of giving high-fat gifts of food, choose salads, whole-grain breads, hearty soups and fruit. Offer to take people out for a healthy meal. Offer to do the grocery shopping or go to the store with them to be sure they're stocked up on healthy food. Be willing to follow through by helping them prepare food, especially meals that can be frozen and reheated for later.

Rest

With the challenges of mourning, bereaved people quickly learn to appreciate the need for rest. Adequate sleep enables people to recharge their batteries.

But many bereaved people find it difficult to get a good night's rest. Some toss and turn all night. Others retreat into the refuge of sleep, but they never find themselves truly rested. And they come to realize that increased consumption of coffee, tea, soda and alcohol can add to their problems.

What bereaved people can do: If you're considering using sleeping pills, check first with your physician and pharmacist. Follow this advice even if you choose to use an over-the-counter sleep aid. Several nonhabit-forming nighttime preparations are available without a prescription, including diphenhydramine hydrochloride with acetaminophen (Extra Strength Tylenol PM is an example). Don't overmedicate yourself, or smother your honest reactions to loss with painkillers or sedatives. Grief needs to be experienced and worked through.

Take other steps to improve your rest, including lying down for short stretches. Creating a nighttime ritual can help as well. That could include a soak in a warm tub, a light snack and some reading. White noise machines, which emit a soothing hum or nature sounds, also can be helpful. Try different strategies to find the ones that work for you.

How friends or loved ones can help: Ask how bereaved people are sleeping and offer some of the tips suggested above. Give a bedtime gift basket that includes a nighttime herbal tea (caffeine-free), bath salts, some light reading or a book on tape to encourage a relaxing evening.

Exercise

In addition to rest, bereaved people also need exercise. But they don't need to feel this is yet another burden or arduous task they must complete. Exercise can help bereaved people refocus their thoughts and redirect their energies – even if only for a little while. It can also get them out of the house and block the tendency to retreat from life and isolate themselves.

What bereaved people can do: Try strolling around the block or walking with a friend through a park to help loosen muscles and get your blood pumping. If you're in the mood for company, consider bike riding, tennis or golf or another sport that requires a buddy. If you want time alone, consider jogging, swimming or using a videotape to try yoga at home.

How friends or loved ones can help: Invite people out to do something active, whether it's a walk around the neighborhood, a hike in the woods or an afternoon of golf. If people would rather be alone, offer to provide some exercise tapes.

Resources Are Available

Call us for more information, help and support. Counselors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to provide confidential assistance at no cost to you. Additional information, self-help tools and other resources are available online at www.MagellanHealth.com.

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