

Grief affects the body, not just the mind

February 26 2024, by Ernie Mundell



Of course grief can ravage your mind, but science shows it can also weaken your body, leaving you open to illness.

"As humans, we are strongly motivated to seek out [social bonds](#) that are warm, dependable, friendly and supportive," explained George Slavich.

He directs the Laboratory for Stress Assessment and Research at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA.

"Losing someone close to us terminates that bond and the social and physical protection they provided, which historically could have put the body at an increased risk of physical danger," he added in a UCLA article.

Much of that danger comes from a hypervigilant, but in some ways weakened, immune system.

As Slavich explained, after the loss of a loved one, your brain and body react as if they've lost a key line of defense. The immune system escalates its wound-healing capabilities (priming for potential threats) but at the same time lowers its guard against viruses.

That's why folks are vulnerable to colds and flu when they're hit by [grief](#) or other stressors, Slavich noted.

Bodily [inflammatory responses](#) also rise, he added, and that can lead to "feelings of sickness, fatigue, loss of pleasure and social and behavioral withdrawal."

Physical pain might also result from grief. One [study](#) found that heightened production of immune system proteins could make grieving people more sensitive to pain.

Even your [gut's microbiome](#) might suffer from grief. Chronic stress can allow bacteria in the gut to migrate outside the [gastrointestinal tract](#), Slavich said, triggering more inflammation as a response.

A constellation of symptoms like these can linger if grief is deep and chronic. Anything past six months could be debilitating, according to

Slavich, and the stress involved might even raise the odds for cancer and early death.

Protect yourself

There are five key steps you can take to shield yourself from the physical effects of grief, however:

- **Try mindfulness.** As people grieve, they often ruminate on the past or worry about the future. Practicing mindfulness helps folks focus on the now, reducing stress
- **Reach out to family and friends.** It's natural when grieving to want to isolate yourself, but resist that urge. Instead, push yourself to spend time with supportive friends and family
- **Eat right.** Added sugars and highly processed foods can boost harmful inflammation. Slavich advises a diet rich in lean proteins, fruit, vegetables, healthy oils and leafy greens
- **Sleep well.** People working their way through grief often find shuteye hard to come by. But having a standard sleep schedule is really important for regulating your [immune system](#). Trying [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) for insomnia could help you get your slumber back on track
- **Exercise.** Even if it feels tough to do while dealing with grief, staying active can help you stay slim, and is often cited as a natural antidepressant

The five steps listed above can all help blunt grief's effect on physical health, but Slavich urges that people set realistic goals.

"The most important thing is to begin with the strategy that you know you'll actually follow through with," he said.

Slavich stressed that your physician needs to know if you're experiencing

a serious stressor like grief. Your doctor can help you manage grief, but ""if they don't know what's going on in your life, they won't be able to help," Slavich noted.

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