

# LIVING *with* LOSS

## THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALTHY EATING, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, AND SLEEP



*“The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not ‘get over’ the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again, but you will never be the same.”*

– Elizabeth Kübler-Ross

Grief is a natural and strong emotional reaction to loss. Everyone grieves differently, due in part, by the nature of the loss. For example, people experience grief with the passing of a loved one, a terminal diagnosis, a breakup, the loss of a pet, job termination, natural disasters, a move, and the loss of independence or disability.

Grieving loss can take a mental and physical toll on overall health and well-being. Understanding your sorrow and seeking support from family and friends, bereavement support groups, or professional counselors can help you work through the emotional aspects of grieving. The Cleveland Clinic says there is no time limit on grief. But there is hope that over time, the intensity of the pain and numbness associated with grief can decrease as you learn to adapt to life with loss. Understanding your emotions and taking physical care of yourself can also help you move forward and heal. Specifically, three main ways of taking care of yourself while grieving are maintaining a healthy diet, staying physically active, and practicing proper sleep habits.



## HEALTHY EATING

Embracing healthy dietary habits across every stage of life is key to promoting and maintaining overall health and well-being, according to the U.S. Departments of Agriculture (USDA) and Health and Human Services (HHS). Yet it is common for people who are grieving to stress eat out of nervousness, turn to calories for comfort, or to stop eating or preparing meals because they are too overwhelmed or lack motivation. While taking care of yourself — including your body — may be difficult while grieving, it is important. Eating right can promote energy and positivity, in addition to healthy brain function and the body's ability to fight disease and infection.

**Tips for eating healthy while grieving** from the USDA and HHS:

- **Think ahead and keep meal preparation simple.** You do not have to eat fancy, extravagant meals. You just have to eat well. Make a batch of brown rice or quinoa, pre-cut and save a bowl of fruit and vegetables, or cook some extra chicken. The leftovers can be turned into sandwiches, salads, and other meals.
- **Maintain your personal preferences,** cultural traditions, and budgetary considerations.
- **Follow the USDA 2020-2025 My Plate nutrition guidelines** to get nutrient-dense food and to stay within calorie guidelines. Specifically, the guidelines suggest that you should eat:
  - A variety of fruits and vegetables — especially those that are dark green, red, and orange
  - Grains, making sure at least half of the grains you consume are whole grains
  - Fat-free or low-fat dairy (milk, yogurt, and cheese)
  - An assortment of protein, including seafood, lean meats, eggs, legumes, nuts, and seeds
  - Healthy oils, including oils from plant sources such as olive oil
- **Limit unhealthy food and drinks.** Specifically, you should limit your consumption of saturated fats and trans fats, as well as sodium and added sugars. If you consume alcohol, make sure to drink in moderation. Limit your caffeine, sugary juices, and soda intake, and drink more water. Ideally, men should drink 15.5 cups of water per day, and women should drink 11.5 cups per day, according to the Mayo Clinic.
- **Recognize the difference between junk food and convenience food.** Avoid processed foods, bags of potato chips, and candy. But there are ready-made or freezer meals that have natural, healthy ingredients to make mealtimes easier. You can also purchase pre-sliced vegetables and fruits, canned beans, and healthy grains.
- **Consume vitamin-rich foods to boost your immune system.** Foods rich in vitamin C can help keep your immune system healthy. Foods rich in vitamin C include oranges, strawberries, kiwi, broccoli, and kale.

## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Physical activity keeps your body healthy and improves overall well-being and life quality. Staying active while grieving is especially important, because grieving can take a toll on your health. The Cleveland Clinic warns that a lack of physical movement while grieving can put you more at risk of developing mental health issues, such as depression. It is important to understand that you do not need to engage in strenuous exercise to gain benefits. You can just move your body more gently by getting up and walking each day.

The American Heart Association, Mayo Clinic, and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services all agree that engaging in physical activity has a variety of benefits that can be pivotal in helping you stay healthy while grieving, including:

- Improving mental health, such as alleviating depression and anxiety
- Promoting cognitive functioning
- Increasing your ability to engage in everyday activities by boosting energy
- Promoting restful sleep
- Boosting mood naturally

### Tips for staying physically active while grieving

- Start simple. Because grieving is often exhausting, you should start simple and plan to move your body in ways that are manageable for you while you move through the grief process. The simplest way to begin an exercise routine is to walk more. You can walk outside and get a breath of fresh air, or you can go somewhere like a mall or a grocery store. Another option is to do some light stretching or yoga to release stress and tension.
- Do things you enjoy. While you are grieving, it may feel like you have no desire to do the things you used to love to do. However, it can be helpful to set aside some time for The Importance of Healthy Eating, Physical Activity, and Sleep 3 yourself to do things that bring enjoyment. For example, if you love to be outside, you can hike, go for a walk through the park, or spend time gardening.
- Ask friends or family to do physical activities with you. Having social support while grieving is incredibly beneficial to navigating the bereavement period. Having another person to gently encourage you to be active can help when we experience those times when we don't have the energy or motivation to do it alone.

Physical activity may seem like a difficult task to do while grieving, but it can be very beneficial to combat the negative experience that grieving a loved one's passing can have on overall health and well-being.





## SLEEP

Difficulty with sleeping is common for those who are grieving. When one is grieving the loss of a person with whom they shared a bed, sleeping can be particularly difficult. The feelings of sadness and loss can intensify around bedtime. Not getting quality sleep means that you are at greater risk of experiencing depression, anxiety, and stress. Likewise, poor sleep quality can contribute to feelings of depression as well as lower quality of life, according to the American Psychiatric Association. Poor sleep quality also contributes to the risk of developing serious physical health issues, including cardiovascular disease, coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer, and gastrointestinal issues, according to the National Sleep Foundation.



The amount of sleep that you need depends on age. According to the National Sleep Foundation, adults need between 7 and 9 hours of sleep per night.

### **Tips for improving sleep hygiene** from the National Sleep Foundation

1. Keep a consistent sleep schedule. Try to stick to the same bedtime and wake up time.
2. Do a relaxing nighttime activity before bedtime.
3. Avoid naps throughout the day.
4. Engage in physical activity.
5. Sleep in a cool, quiet, dark room (add fans, curtains, eye masks, earplugs, etc., if needed).
6. Create a comfortable sleeping environment, including a mattress and pillows that are comfortable for you.
7. Avoid caffeine, alcohol, cigarettes, and large meals before bedtime.
8. Avoid screens and bright light in the evening.
9. If you can't sleep, go into another room and engage in a relaxing activity until you get sleepy again.

## CONCLUSION

After a loss, it is common for people to ditch routines and/or struggle with eating, physical activity, and sleep. But if these habits spiral and continue for more than a few weeks, recognize that you are at increased risk for experiencing depression, social isolation, and chronic illness. Know that you are not alone in dealing with the difficult emotional and physical experiences associated with loss. Take control by focusing on doing things that promote overall physical and mental health, including a focus on eating healthy, engaging in physical activity, and getting enough sleep.

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