

Name

**Physical Grief**

***by Sherry Williams White***

When a friend or loved one dies, all kinds of things are going through your mind. You may be overwhelmed by emotions. You may experience physical symptoms that seem unexplainable, such as loss of appetite or sudden weight gain, shortness of breath, confusion or depression. You may not be able to turn your mind off at night. Your heart may feel like it is racing.  Many people say they feel as if they have a lump in their throat or a hole in the pit of their stomach. These reactions, along with many others are very normal reactions to your loss. You are grieving and grief is the natural and normal reaction to loss.

Grief is a complex process that affects every aspect of your life.  It is a physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological response. And, because you are being bombarded by change, your body reacts automatically through numerous chemical and hormonal changes to bring you back in balance. These reactions are all part of the stress cycle that accompanies grief called the fight or flight response. This is your natural instinct for survival and these changes will occur even if you try not to respond or feel.  They are natural, normal and necessary but they can be frightening if you don't understand what is happening to you.

**What is happening to me?**

As your body is trying to adapt to all the changes and stress that you are experiencing, many physical and emotional feelings occur. Think about a time when you've been frightened or startled suddenly. Your heart began to race, your hands became cold and clammy, the hair on your arms stood up, your senses became very keen and your breathing occurred automatically as your body was preparing to fight off the threat, the fear of impending danger or the demand made upon it to adapt. These biological defense mechanisms are very powerful. Your body is one of your greatest allies, so try to understand how it works.

At the time a threat or a need occurs, your body automatically produces adrenalin which is a hormone that arouses us to quick action. This causes your heart rate to increase and forces more blood into the muscles which increases your strength. At the same time, the blood vessels on the surface of the skin constrict (become smaller or close up) to prevent excessive bleeding if you are injured by the threat. This is also what makes your hands feel cold and clammy. This all happens within 1-3 seconds. It is spontaneous and immediate as your body prepares to combat the danger.

When someone you love dies, you may experience changes in your identity, your role, position and responsibilities in the family. Your sense of security may feel threatened and you may feel unsure. All of these changes cause the same chemical/biological changes to occur in your body. And they occur over and over again with every new change, challenge or need to adapt. This can lead to a build up of chemicals and feelings of instability which compound stress. So, your body responds again by producing additional chemicals or hormones to bring things back into balance. Some of these hormones are released immediately and some take as long as 6-10 days to come about.

The Adrenocorticotropic Hormone (ACTH) is released by the pituitary gland which is the gland that controls growth and development. The ACTH then stimulates the production of Aldosterone which causes salt to be absorbed by the kidneys. This can lead to increased blood pressure, water retention, and sometimes shortness of breath which can cause you to feel dizzy. It becomes important to watch salt intake and drink plenty of water. ACTH also enhances the production of Cortisol which causes increased glucose (sugar) levels in the blood. Your body cannot handle all of this sugar, and this leads to feelings of anxiousness and excitability. Cortisol also causes fat, protein and Vitamin B complex to break down.  When this happens, your energy level drops and your muscles become weaker. The immune system (that part of your body that fights off bacteria) begins to weaken and this makes you more susceptible to infections. You may begin to notice that you're catching everything that goes around. This is a signal that you need to do something to reduce stress and take better care of yourself.

ACTH is also responsible for the production of Thyroxin. Thyroxin causes increased metabolism, which is the rate at which chemical processes take place in your body. This causes changes in oxygen consumption, increases the rate and depth of breathing and puts added stress on the heart.

Thyroxin increases the digestive activity and production of gastric juices. Because everyone is unique, everyone's bodies function very differently. For some, the increase of gastric juices or acids will cause feelings of hunger. In others, it will cause feelings of nausea or not wanting to eat at all. You may even have unexplained bouts of diarrhea.

Thyroxin also causes anxiety, confusion, insomnia, feelings of suspicion and dejection along with muscle tremors and weakness. You may feel like you can't shut off your mind or feel worried and excited at the same time. You may experience sleep difficulties, exhaustion and very real and vivid dreams. This is all normal.

**What can I do?**

Take better care of yourself. Express your feelings. Getting your feelings out in the open releases the tension valve and helps you define alternatives and find insights about yourself as you begin to adjust. If you can't talk about things, write them down. Journaling is an excellent stress reducer. Try to give structure to your feelings and experiences by acknowledging them.

It is even more important now to get 6-8 hours sleep or rest. If you're having problems sleeping, try some relaxation techniques such as deep breathing exercises, tensing and relaxing your muscles or imagining yourself in a peaceful or quiet place. You might focus on the ticking of a clock or the rate at which your heart beats. Many bookstores and libraries carry a variety of relaxation tapes that you might find helpful.

Proper nutrition is important. A balance of protein, fruits and vegetables can help break the stress cycle by building muscle and enhancing the ability of the immune system. Watch your intake of caffeine and processed sugars. Cut down on alcohol. It is also important to exercise regularly. Exercise helps to cleanse the system by removing the cell's waste materials as well as preventing wear and tear on the body. Believe it or not, walking is the best exercise there is. Walking 15-30 minutes a day is the best medicine you can take.

The mind, body and spirit are one. When someone you love dies, part of you dies, transforms and changes. When your body hurts, your mind and spirit hurt too. You do not sing, dance or laugh as much. You experience pain and grief. If you take steps in your grief work to care for yourself, plan time for relaxation and allow yourself to laugh again. You may even discover a healing of your mind, body and spirit as you reach toward living. You may emerge into something different - not better, not worse, just different.