

Tides of a Caregiver's Grief

BY KARYN DAVIES



“Grief is like the ocean; it comes on waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim.”

— Vicki Harrison

Sometimes it is helpful to have a visual image in mind that describes the emotional meaning of an experience. In the role of caregiving, I liken the experience of ongoing loss and grief to that of an ocean tide that ebbs and flows. As a care partner's health condition causes their mind or body to change in significant ways, there are many losses for the caregiver. Adapting to the introduction of difficult symptoms such as pain, lowered energy levels, and mental disorganization does take enormous amounts of physical and emotional energy for you, the caregiver. These health changes often cause shifts in how you can relate to your care partner. The loss of close relationship, familiar routines, and sense of security can happen either in slow and subtle changes, or sudden and dramatic shifts.

All of this is a lot for the caregiver's heart to hold.

Because the link you have with your care partner is distinct, and you have an important story that has been woven together over time- there is no simple road map to follow in navigating the emotions of grief that arise. Sadness, disbelief, guilt, frustration, and uncertainty on how to continue forward are very understandable feelings as you walk this challenging territory. It is normal to feel many different emotions throughout the day or week, and some days the sadness may feel intense and all consuming. Finding ways to honour your feelings and to express them will be helpful in your practice of self-care.



Here are a few books on grief and loss you may wish to read:

- *Good Grief Rituals: Tools for healing.* Elaine Childs-Gowell.
- *Grief's Courageous Journey.* Sandi Caplan and Gordon Lang.
- *Life after loss.* Bob Deits.
- *Healing a Spouse's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas After Your Husband or Wife Dies.* Alan Wolfelt.
- *Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart.* Alan Wolfelt.
- *A letter of consolation.* Henri Nouwen

Relevant Links:

- Centre for loss and life transition
<http://www.centerforloss.com/bookstore/home.php>
- Family Services of Greater Vancouver: Counseling Support
<http://www.fsgv.ca/find-the-support-you-need/counselling/>
- Lower Mainland Grief Recovery Society
<http://lmgr.ca/>

Remember to find little ways of being kind to yourself as the tides of grief come about. You have shown dedication in doing the best you can with the resources you've had available. It may be helpful to decide which of your friends and family members you feel able to share your feelings of loss with. Learning to let others into your most heartfelt experiences can be a profound way of deepening the care and support you receive from those in your life.

I invite you to make a kindness date with yourself once a week. This might include setting aside a little time for a nourishing activity such as a massage, or going for a walk with a trusted friend. Scheduling something in your week that focuses on your well-being will help to uplift your heart, mind and body just that little bit, which can make a world of difference.