



UNITED
BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

Life Balance

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

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Moving Through Grief: Exercise Can Help

We all know exercise is “good for you,” but did you know that physical activity has been proven to help with symptoms of depression and anxiety? And since many of the symptoms of depression and anxiety are the same as the symptoms of grief, exercise can be a powerful aid in coping with the loss of a loved one.

Regular Exercise Helps Grievers Overcome Depression

For many years, experts have known that exercise enhances the action of endorphins, chemicals that circulate throughout the body.¹ Endorphins improve natural immunity and reduce the perception of pain. They may also serve to improve mood. Another theory is that exercise stimulates the neurotransmitter norepinephrine, which may directly improve mood.

Regular exercise offers other health benefits too – such as lowering blood pressure, protecting against heart disease and cancer, and boosting self-esteem.

Start Exercise Gradually

Of course, in the very first difficult days and weeks of acute grief, mourners may be virtually immobilized. Sleeping and eating are difficult enough. There may be no leftover energy for exercise. As the months pass, however, exercise can play a powerful role in re-engaging with life.

Work Up to More Regular Exercise

Once someone is feeling more like him or her self, for general health, experts advise getting half an hour to an hour of moderate exercise, such as brisk walking, on all or most days of the week.

Run or Walk in Someone’s Memory to Create a Positive Legacy

Participating in a local race or walk that benefits a charity or supports a medical cause in memory of a loved one can help with the grieving process because it’s a time to let feelings out and think about the person who is gone. Grievers can feel like they’re doing something meaningful to honor their loved one and, at the same time, connect to their community, which can reduce their feelings of isolation.

It’s not always easy to work through grief, and the experience can be overwhelming. You don’t have to go it alone. We’re here to help. Call or log on any time for help with any of life’s challenges.

What is Grief and What Causes Grief?

When we experience loss, we have a reaction to our loss. This reaction is grief. Grief can be experienced both emotionally and physically.

The loss is not always the death of someone close to us. We can experience grief over the loss of anything dear or comfortable to us.

Some situations that may result in feelings of grief and loss include:

- Death of a loved one
- Loss of job or financial security
- Loss of a dream
- Loss of a relationship
- Moving away from your home
- Retiring from a career or changing careers
- Graduating from school
- Loss of your or a loved one’s health
- Death of a pet
- Loss of safety after a traumatic incident

SEAP

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Benefits of Exercise in Coping with Grief

Exercise of any form will bring mental and physical health benefits. The key is finding something you enjoy and sticking with it.

Vicki Costa, LCSW, Associate Director, Family Support Services, Delaware Hospice, Inc., works with people in grief. She offers these benefits of using exercise to cope with loss and depression.²

- 1. Exercise can take you outside of your own head.** If you look around you, at others in the gym or in a natural setting, you may see something bigger than your own pain.
- 2. Grief moves at its own pace;** it's a bit of a mystery, and sometimes it's hard to see progress. Exercise can restore a sense of control in life because it provides a sense of confidence and mastering something.
- 3. Exercise provides physical benefits** because it releases endorphins, which can increase a sense of well-being.
- 4. Exercise is perfect for "instrumental" grievers,** people who are "head-oriented" and don't want to talk about their feelings. They are more "task-oriented" in their grief process and want something to do.
- 5. It is also perfect for "intuitive" grievers,** people who are "heart oriented." They are emotionally expressive and want to talk. For them, exercise can provide a way to have a sense of community and connect with other people.

Resources

United Behavioral Health
www.liveandworkwell.com

Search for these articles and more: "Why We Grieve Differently," "The Basics: Grief and Bereavement Toolkit," "Strategies to Cope with Grief"

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¹ Harvard Medical School. Special HealthReport. "Understanding Depression." www.health.harvard.edu/UD. Accessed November 29, 2011.

² Newsline, 2011 Spring Quarterly Report, Vol. 22, NO. 4, page 3, National Hospice Foundation. http://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/nhpcg/newsline_201104/index.php?startid=41#/38. Accessed November 29, 2011.