



Navigating through loss and grief

When we hear the words loss and grief, we most commonly think they refer to a person's death or the end of life.

However, we can feel a profound sense of loss and grief when our lives go through major changes especially with a diagnosis of cancer¹. Many people describe multiple losses and a sense of grief after a diagnosis of advanced cancer and many of these losses can go unrecognised and unacknowledged^{2,3}.

The experience of loss and grief is highly personal and how one person responds will be different to how someone else responds. This is because there are many things that can influence the experience including the personal meaning or relationship with what has been lost, the cause of the loss, someone's past history of loss and other significant life events, personality and coping style, support from family and friends, cultural customs, religious and spiritual beliefs^{1,4,5}.



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Loss and grief are often described as waves of intense and painful emotions that come and go and people will commonly describe a painful yearning for what has been lost⁴. After a diagnosis of advanced breast cancer people describe many powerful emotions which can make recognising loss and grief challenging^{6,7}. Also, because we associate loss and grief with death, naming feelings as loss and grief can be difficult especially in the context of a life limiting illness^{1,5}.

The losses that people describe after a diagnosis of advanced breast cancer can be tangible and intangible. Tangible losses include things such as the loss of hair, loss of fertility, loss of a job, loss of a relationship, loss of goals and the loss of independence. Intangible losses include things such as the loss of who you are without advanced breast cancer, loss of a sense that life is safe and predictable, loss of meaning and purpose, loss of the future, and a loss of hopes and dreams. Because these are mostly invisible, it can be hard to explain them to others not having a similar experience. These losses often happen at the same time so the feelings can accumulate. People also describe having new discoveries of losses that they weren't expecting and this can be difficult to deal with. The grief associated with the losses can be triggered by things such as life milestones and family celebrations but also by changes associated with cancer such as starting or finishing a treatment, having a blood test, or simply seeing a doctor's appointment in a calendar¹⁻⁷.

There are several well-known theories about grief and the grief process. Some theories suggest that there are specific stages of grief that people go through as they cope with loss. Whilst these theories can be very useful to help people understand their loss and grief and to feel that their experience may be similar to others⁴, they don't always allow people to appreciate that grief and loss is very individual but also very complicated. Not all stages apply to everyone or in a particular order.

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There are a number of things that can help with the experience of loss and grief¹⁻⁷.

- ✔ Acknowledge the loss and allow yourself to feel the pain of the loss. This can be a significant challenge because facing the pain is unpleasant and many people will judge themselves for feeling bad. But it is ok to acknowledge and recognise that there is no right way of doing this. Practice self-compassion. Acknowledging loss acknowledges that something that is loved, cherished, appreciated or that matters has gone and the only way of avoiding that pain is not having anything in life that is worth losing. Honour the grief and don't minimise or dismiss it.
- ✔ Don't go it alone. Talking to others can help, sharing how you feel helps to acknowledge the loss. If talking to those close to you doesn't feel right, engage with professional support that is available. Sometimes talking about loss and grief to someone you don't know can be easier.
- ✔ Recognise that the waves of emotion will come and go, some days will be better than others. Don't be afraid of it. Trust that the feelings will decrease.
- ✔ Grieve the losses as they come. Putting them off doesn't make them go away.
- ✔ Express yourself creatively.
- ✔ Find ways to connect with what matters to you.
- ✔ Move your body as you are able to. Physical movement can help with emotional movement and expression.
- ✔ Have a routine or structure to your days which can help you connect and have purpose.
- ✔ You are allowed to have a break from grief. It is ok to laugh and enjoy moments, people, and activities.



- ✔ Connect with the simple things that you find pleasurable. Whether it is feeling wind in your hair, the warmth of a blanket, the taste of a square of chocolate, the sound of a laugh or a voice. Simple momentary pleasures can give you a moment of relief.
- ✔ Try to make sense of the loss and to put it into perspective without dismissing it.
- ✔ If the intense feelings prevent you from experiencing or participating in everyday life, seek professional support.

Resources to help you on your journey.

- ✔ Breast cancer foundation website – offers information, support, counselling, rehab www.breastcancerfoundation.org.nz
- ✔ Cancer Society – offers information, support, counselling www.cancernz.org.nz
- ✔ Mental Health foundation – information and support www.mentalhealth.org.nz
- ✔ Need to talk, free call/text/email 1737.org.nz
- ✔ Lifeline. Free confidential support www.lifeline.org.nz

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