

GRIEF IS.....?

Here is a mixture of images that capture what people's experience of grief can be like.

For many people visual images are useful tools. Children and teenagers and adults alike often find them a good way to better understand concepts that are new to them.

Skylight has gathered this collection over time from many sources. We hope you will find them helpful. Thanks to those many people who have contributed to the list!

Grief is like your fingerprint. Your experience of it will be unique and personal to you. No one's grief is exactly like yours. You can grieve in ways that suit you and who you are.



Grief is like being hit by big waves. They toss you around, turn your life upside down and dump you on the beach. Just as you try to catch a breath you're swept up again. You fight to find which way is up. Gradually you realise there are a few more minutes between waves. One day you find yourself sitting on the beach drying out, with the waves some distance away. You've forgotten how good the sun feels. Then a random wave hits and you are right back in the rough sea again. Except it's not quite the same and you find yourself landing higher up on the beach. As time goes by the waves toss you round less and less. Gradually you come to recognise that there's always the chance of a random wave. But now you know you won't drown.

Grief is like a river. You're caught in its current, hit with waves of pain and emotion. Sometimes it becomes quiet and you drift, then you can find yourself crashing against rocks that hurt and whirlpools that confuse and overwhelm you. You feel you have no power to get to the bank but find yourself there sometimes. You can rest a while until you're swept off once more, towards who knows what?

Grief is like a cloud. It rarely stays the same shape for long. It's always on the move and changing shape – sometimes so slowly you hardly notice. Grief is like this. In the big picture our grief can seem like it's not moving - like it's always the same. But when we look more closely we can get a glimpse of how it is changing – slowly, in different places, bit by bit. Take a look up at a big cloud and watch a

part of it closely. See how it edges this way or that. Sometimes it blocks the sun. Other times it lets sun through...

Grief is like an onion. As I grieve another layer of onion peels back and exposes new parts of myself and my pain. With each new layer there are tears. But also personal insights.

Grief is like a journey. It takes you down a road you haven't travelled before – though you may have been on similar ones. You're not sure of your destination and as you go along the road you face ups and downs, straights and corners, surprises and monotony. You become weary but you also - occasionally – get to see some amazing views. It's great if you can find company, friends to help you carry your baggage sometimes or to chat with or share the scenery as you go. One day you realise just how far you've come.

Grief is like wearing a very tight fitting pair of shoes. You want to take them off – but you can't. You're stuck with them. You can't think of anything else except your hurting feet. This is like grief when you can't think of anything else but your pain. Your whole body starts to feel achy and sore. Everything becomes uncomfortable. Grief is an experience that affects the whole body.

Grief is like being caught inside a bubble. The shock of early grief feels like you're somehow separated from the world around you, and the people in it. Everything seems woolly and hazy and sounds are muffled. You seem far away and nobody can reach you. Then the bubble bursts, and you wish you could be back inside it!

Grief is like a flood. Its waters flood into every part of me. It can come unexpectedly as a torrent, or like a stream that constantly flows, filling every corner of me. It's cold. It runs right through me, lapping right over all my thoughts and feelings. Very, very slowly it flows quietly away.

Grief is like paddling a rudderless canoe in an ocean storm. The endless waves crash over the sides of my little boat. I can't direct where I am going. I know if I can just hang on and keep padding I will be okay. I'll reach the shore. The storm will blow itself out eventually.

Grief is like looking through one way glass. You can see others, but they can't see you. It's like you're invisible to them as they busily are going on with their lives, when your own life has come to a complete halt.

Grief is like a painful wound. At the start there's little feeling because we're numb. Then it begins to hurt and we feel the pain. It is open, and exposes raw flesh and nerve endings. It stings. It hurts so much. And anything like a memory or new experience that touches it or bumps it makes it hurt all over again. It can be almost unbearable. We need to look after it so it doesn't get infected as well.

Gradually a scab grows over the wound and it becomes less sensitive. At times we might 'pick at the scab' for example, by visiting a cemetery or looking at old photos, and we know we will probably hurt badly again. When you realise the wound has slowly but surely healed up you will see a scar. But that's okay – of course a wound that deep would leave a mark.

Grief is like having a heavy weight on your chest. It's hard to breathe. You feel panicky at times. You have to take big sighs to catch a deep breath. Your chest actually aches.

Grief is like having your pockets full of heavy rocks. It weighs you down. It slows you down. You feel dragged down emotionally, mentally and physically.

Grief is like travelling on a hijacked plane. You've suddenly and unexpectedly been taken to a strange land, against your will. You don't know the language or how things are done here. When you try to speak to others, they don't seem to really understand you, even though they're trying to. Your friends and family think you'll be back to your old self eventually. It slowly dawns that there is no way back to how things used to be. You realise you can't return to your life in the world as you knew it.

Grief is like a house during winter. It shelters you against the outside world. The windows and doors are shut to keep out the cold. It's dark and you can see little outside. But it does make a safe place to be, and for wounds to heal.

Grief is like the wind. When it's blowing you can put up your boat's sails and begin to move ahead. But when it is gale force you have to stay in the harbour to keep safe. When it's a gentle breeze again, you can go sailing at an easier pace and see the view around you. You might even be able to stop for a picnic along the way...

Grief is like a roller coaster ride. It is an up and down journey that can be terrifying. There are plenty of times people want to just scream! Your emotions can change from day to day, hour to hour, and even moment by moment. You can feel upside down, then the right way up. Eventually things slow and you can catch a breath.

Grief is like having a sharp edged stone rubbing inside of you. Gradually its pointed edges will become smoother, but the actual stone itself will always be there, inside of you. It is part of you.

Grief is like a bomber, dropping its bombs on you and often getting a direct hit.

Grief is like a long, winding tunnel. The entrance has closed behind you. The only way out of the tunnel, is to go through it.

Grief is like a jigsaw puzzle. We thought we had all the pieces in place then they are suddenly tipped out onto the floor as our life falls apart. We try to pick them up and put them back together, but some seem to be missing. Others don't seem to fit and the picture we're making up isn't the one we thought we'd started with. It's confusing to know how to begin again, but slowly a new picture emerges. And every piece is needed for it.

Grief is like Velcro being pulled open. Your world has been ripped apart from how it used to be. You have been ripped apart from someone or something you love. It is a painful, tearing sensation.

Grief is like a bridge you need to cross. It reaches from what things used to be like over to what your reality is now. It takes a very long time to cross.

Grief is like winter. It comes along uninvited and very unwelcome. **It feels the old ways have died.** But grief is also like spring. It is an awakening to a new self and a new world.

Grief is like a being in a bottle of fizzy drink. It shakes you up. The pressure in you builds until the drink spills out. The trick is to allow the pressure out bit by bit, so there's no big explosion of emotion and intensity. After all, there's nothing quite like the mess of a bottle of drink exploding everywhere.

Grief is like being homesick. We have a longing to be back where we were - in a loving and safe place. We are homesick for our world the way it was before...

Grief is like a butterfly. One wing is the life you knew before. The other is the new life you are building. The body is all the thoughts, feelings and experiences that are brought together to lift the wings up and let you - eventually - fly.

Grief is like being on a gentle bike ride when an obstacle suddenly appears, and though you brake hard you find yourself **crashing and going over your handle bars.**

Grief is like having someone else's CD playing. You haven't chosen it. You can't turn it off....may as well get to know it....

Grief is like a shadow - sometimes big sometimes small, but always with you.

Grief is like you have a ticket in your hand, but the bus left without you.
But, I have my ticket....!!!!

Grief is like losing your way home to yourself.

Grief is like a barren tree in a winter field, stark and cold and alone. Then, after awhile, a bud, a leaf, and life comes again.



A Skylight information sheet

Grief is like a pounding headache...it can come on you all of a sudden and you can't shake it off.

Grief is like being shell shocked.

Grief is like having your snuggly rug taken away...or whatever it is that provides you with comfort and security.

Grief is like experiencing both the pits and the peaks.

Grief is like losing your sense of balance and getting the wobbles.

Grief is like a heavy weight on top of you that you can't lift off of you.

Grief is like a bad movie that you can not stop.

Grief is like an artistic process. It has its own need for expression.

If you'd like to suggest another image that helps to explain something of the human grief experience please contact Skylight at

rs@skylight-trust.org.nz

on **0800 299 100** (New Zealand) or +64 4 939 6767.

Thank you.

