



SELF-CARE IN THE FIRST 12 MONTHS

PARENT & GUARDIAN



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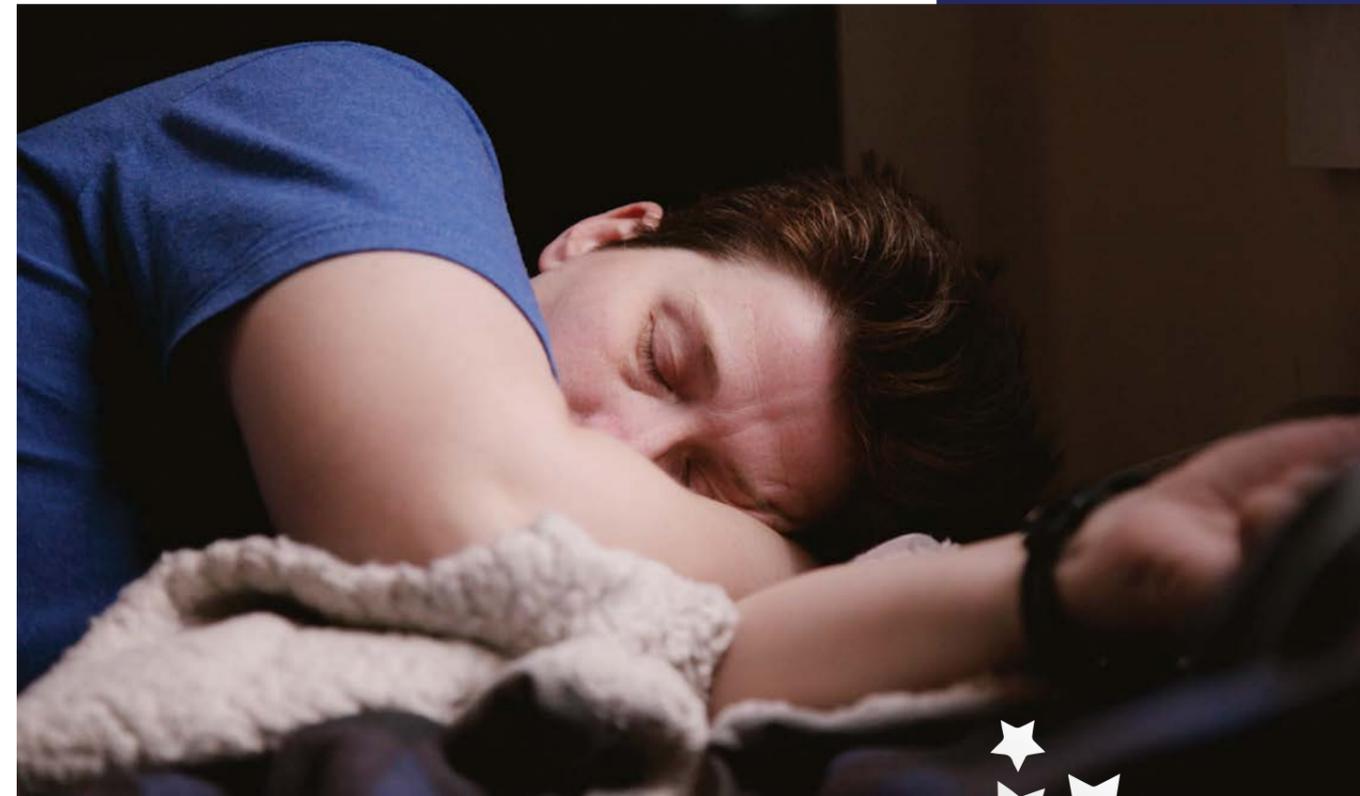
HOW TO LOOK AFTER YOURSELF DURING THE FIRST 12 MONTHS, FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE

Grief is an emotionally, mentally, and physically exhausting process. In order to best support yourself through this difficult time, self-care needs to become a priority. By recognising and nurturing your needs, you will strengthen your ability to navigate both your own and your child's challenging grief journey.

1. LOOK AFTER YOUR PHYSICAL HEALTH

It can be easy to neglect your physical health while grieving. Your body houses the turbulent emotions that come up in the grieving process, and it responds to the impact of the loss in turn. The most common physical responses to loss are difficulty with sleep and low energy. You may find yourself needing much more sleep than usual, or even have trouble falling and staying asleep. You may also notice you're lacking energy throughout the day either as a result of your troubled sleep or your body's natural tendency to want to slow down after such a painful experience. Being sleep deprived can limit our abilities to think clearly and regulate our emotions, which can negatively impact our work, responsibilities, and relationships. When you are well rested, you will be better prepared to handle the emotionally, mentally, and physically demanding grieving process.

To improve your "sleep hygiene", set a bedtime that is early enough for you to get at least 7 hours of sleep and establish a relaxing bedtime routine. Stay well hydrated throughout the day while reducing or eliminating caffeine past midday. Both nicotine and alcohol disrupt sleep patterns, so making changes to your smoking and/or drinking at this time would support healthy sleeping habits. Try not to eat late at night and, perhaps, turn to a caffeine-free tea to help soothe you to sleep. Try not to use your phone, tablet, or any other device in bed, and put all screens away at least 30 minutes before bedtime. Exercising regularly and maintaining a healthy diet can greatly help in this effort as well. As difficult as it may seem, making an effort to regulate your sleep, eat nutritionally balanced meals, and fit in regular exercise will bolster your capacity to cope with all that grief will throw at you in the first 12 months.



2. PRACTICE SELF-COMPASSION

When we are compassionate toward others, we recognise they are in pain, abandon any judgment of or resistance to it, and allow the loving-kindness within us to flow toward the suffering individual. Self-compassion involves giving the same kindness to ourselves that we would give others. We must acknowledge and accept that we are in pain, and rather than run from it, turn toward it with a will to confront it gently with loving-kindness. While self-compassion is not a cultural norm and can be uncomfortable, it has incredible healing power and even makes us more compassionate to those around us who are suffering amidst the loss.

Allow yourself to grieve. Grief is a personally unique experience, with no set time frame or universal set of steps to follow. Think of the patience and consideration you would extend to a friend who just suffered a great loss and turn that toward yourself in this time. Make time to reflect on and process your feelings and circumstances surrounding the loss. Be as gentle with yourself as you can, with an understanding that you are going through something incredibly difficult. Be careful not to take on responsibilities beyond what you are realistically capable of handling and don't set expectations of where you "should" be in adjusting after the loss. Honor your emotions as they arise and slow down if you need to in order to work through them rather than sweep them under the rug or bottle them up.



3. BE MINDFUL

Mindfulness is a powerful tool that can be used to ground ourselves amidst the chaos of grief. It is the present moment awareness of what you are experiencing while you are experiencing it. Too frequently we can preoccupy ourselves with how we wish the past were different or how we don't see the future getting much better. Both of these lenses we're looking through are highlighting things that are presently out of our control. Mindfulness involves focusing attention on your stream of perceptions, rather than the interpretations of them, which reminds you that every moment is fresh and alive with possibilities.

Mindfulness can be practiced by taking time out of your day to focus on your breath; allowing thoughts, sensations, judgments, and feelings to arise and pass naturally, without fixating on them; and anchoring your focus back onto your breathing. Breathing mindfully lowers your heart rate, protects you from the "fight-flight-freeze" or stress response, and helps you focus on what you have control over in the moment. Other mindfulness techniques involve focusing attention on things you sense in your environment from moment to moment (things you can see, hear, smell, taste, feel by touch) so you feel more connected to the here and now.

4. STAY CONNECTED

You're not alone. One of the most important things you can do for your emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing is connect with others who care and/or can empathise with your pain. Loneliness is an almost universal emotion felt when someone so intimately part of your daily life dies. It's natural to want to share things with them and feel alone when you realise you no longer can. Because grief is so unique to the individual and his/her relationship with the deceased, you may also feel alone in the way the loss is impacting you and think no one would really understand what you're going through. Those types of thoughts may cause you to believe there's no point in sharing your struggle with others or even feel like it would be a burden to do so.

Although grief is a lonely and potentially isolating experience, it will be important to ensure you make a concerted effort to go for walks, schedule lunches, plan tea, etc. with trusted friends or family members with whom you can share mutual support. Loss-specific support groups are a great venue to find individuals with lived experience of grief who can relate to you. Although your grief journey may not look quite like theirs, being supported by and reciprocally supporting them as you share experiences can be a liberating and healing experience. In such situations, voicing your struggle





would be accepted with open arms and, by some, received as recognition that they are not alone as well. If groups are not your thing and you can't think of someone you feel comfortable seeking such support from, you may enlist a trusted compassionate grief counsellor or therapist to walk with you on your grief journey.

THE FEEL THE MAGIC GRIEF COMMUNITY IS A GREAT PLACE TO START TO CONNECT WITH OTHERS.



<https://www.facebook.com/groups/ftmgriefcommunity>

5. ASK FOR HELP

Grief is a lot of work. Looking after children who are also grieving while doing so without the support of your lost loved one makes it even harder. We all place a high value on being self-sufficient and keeping it together no matter what, but the position you take on this must be relaxed in your time of mourning. It's simply not realistic to keep meeting all the responsibilities you had prior to the death with the mounting responsibility of taking on your loved one's role in the family, all the while combating the unpredictable and tumultuous experience of grief.

Ask for and accept help from those you trust. We must ask for help so we can make room for self-care. Think about it this way, if you fractured your leg or became ill, you would clearly recognise how bad it would be for you to do certain things at the risk of your health. With matters of mental health, such as grief, we may convince ourselves that acknowledging the injury and making time to heal is somehow weak or unnecessary when it is in fact mature and required in order to heal. Rather than investing energy fighting the fact you need help, spend time considering what forms of support might best serve you and your family. From there, you can narrow down those options that make you most comfortable in seeking the help you and your family need in this difficult time.



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