

Haven Herald



Physical Reactions to Loss and Grief

After the loss of a loved one, we are not surprised to feel sad and tearful. What we may not expect, however, are the many physical reactions our body can have to such a traumatic loss. Studies show that after a loss, some people experience something called the “fight or flight” response, which is a natural human response in the face of any threat. While our physical safety may not be at risk after the death of a loved one, our emotional well-being can certainly feel threatened, and the fight or flight response kicks in.

What Happens During the Fight or Flight Response?

When sensing danger, the body responds by secreting hormones, which help get blood and oxygen to the parts of the body where they can be put to the best use. The heart and large muscles of the legs need oxygen in case we need to run. The brain and sensory organs also need oxygen, so that we can absorb information quickly and then react to the danger. The heart rate and blood pressure increase, blood is diverted to muscle tissue, the breathing rate increases, and digestion slows down. Energy goes to where we need it most. We also secrete corticosteroids (stress hormones). These hormones increase access to stored energy, and make it available for use to confront the immediate danger.

In other words, the body borrows from the future to fight something in the present. These responses may make sense from a survival standpoint, but can deplete the resources we need to deal with a longer-term issue such as grief. If we have just lost a loved one, the fight or flight response can have effects on the body that are not beneficial.

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Letter from the Executive Director

Winter brings its stark beauty and longer nights. It is a season of festivities and challenges to stay warm, safe and well during a very changeable time of year. Winter is also a time of simple pleasures such as cuddling up by a fire or seeing the stars glow on a very cold evening. Haven is busy in winter but also mindful of the weather and the shorter days.

Grief brings its own unique sadness at this time of year and our hearts and bodies may suffer the consequences of a loss. When we grieve we suffer both emotionally and physically.

This issue of the newsletter specifically addresses the physiology of grief. It is important to practice self-care and to be aware of the physical changes we may be experiencing during the difficult days after losing a loved one.

Jill Bellacicco



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Effects on the Body's Functioning

The fight or flight response can cause many disruptions to normal body functioning. People may experience numbness, a "hollow" or "empty" feeling, sleep and appetite disturbances, aches and pains, and trouble concentrating. There may be decreased circulation to the fingers and toes while blood is diverted to larger muscles, resulting in cold hands and feet. Migraine headaches can result from the circulatory system reacting to stress for long periods of time.

Some people react with shallow breathing, or hyperventilation. Taking in too little oxygen with each breath can make us feel like we are lightheaded or floating, with a tingling feeling in our lips, fingers, and toes. Many grieving people find themselves sighing a lot, or sighing more deeply. This is the body's way of trying to ward off the effects of hyperventilation.

The ongoing stress of the loss of a loved one can cause increased muscle tension, which can result in headaches and increased sensitivity to pain. The increased secretion of corticosteroids can inhibit the immune system, resulting in lowered immune function. This means that we might experience more head colds, illness, skin break-outs, or simply feel exhausted and run down.

Physical symptoms are normal reactions during times of grief. There is comfort in knowing that the way you are feeling is not all in your head.

(A synopsis of an article of the same title, prepared by TAPS (Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors), appearing in TAPS Magazine, Spring 2010, Volume 16, Issue 1)

What Worked for Me

by Ann Lyons

When our son died, Buddy, his beloved golden retriever, came to live with my husband and me. During his nine plus years with our son we kept him often and were familiar with his exuberant personality and adored him. Now like us Buddy's world was turned upside down and he was much more subdued. Initially he sat for hours by our front door seeming to watch for our son's return.

As the shock that kept us functioning for the first few weeks faded my husband seemed emotionally together and returned to his job and routine. I went into an emotional meltdown. Just as our emotional reactions were quite diverse but valid for each of us, so our bodies physical reactions to this tragedy were quite different. My husband quickly began experiencing numerous acute medical problems including a heart arrhythmia and a serious eye condition with both problems requiring medical procedures. He was also hospitalized with pneumonia. I, on the other hand, had no acute medical problems but experienced an overwhelming lethargy. I was always tired and felt so slow it was as though I was moving through molasses. Also I was so cold. After a night of fitful, uneasy sleep only at dawn did I experience a deep and restful sleep when I certainly did not want to get out of the warm covers and start another day.

Although I never wanted to get out of bed in the morning, Buddy was there nuzzling me awake and I found myself staring at point blank range into those soft brown eyes of his. That melted my heart and got me up to take care of him. He and I developed a routine of going for a long rambling walk in the morning exploring the neighborhood. He seemed to really enjoy this and I loved to see him more animated again. I too enjoyed it while walking off some of my woes and it got me warmed up. I even began sleeping a little better.

My husband's cardiologist suggested he try to walk regularly so on weekends he joined Buddy and me on our walks. We only had five months with Buddy before he suffered a seizure during one of our walks and was diagnosed with a virulent form of cancer. He died two weeks later.

We grieved but we kept on walking. My husband is now retired and feels well. I am no dynamo but I do get out of the warm covers every morning. We walk most days and enjoy it. Getting us moving was Buddy's gift and I thank him every day.



YOUR GRIEF IS AS UNIQUE AS YOU ARE

“An affliction of the heart may be physical as well as spiritual. Always it is the whole person who must be healed. For what hurts one part hurts the whole.”

—Alla Bozarth Campbell

Some of the most common physical reactions in grief are:

- Headaches or migraines
- Changes in appetite (loss of appetite or overeating)
- Changes in sleep patterns (not sleeping enough or sleeping too much)
- Lowered immune system and resulting illnesses (colds, viruses)
- Nausea, gut or digestive changes
- Weakness and fatigue
- Shallow breathing
- Inability to concentrate or remember
- Rapid heartbeat
- Increased blood pressure
- Dizziness, unsteadiness
- Muscular tension
- Neglect of self (not engaging in routine hygiene)

There are a number of ways to counteract the very real physical responses in your body and help get through this difficult time. Some useful techniques are:

- Breathing from the diaphragm (deep breathing). Imagine a string pulling you up from your abdomen as you slowly inhale through the nose, and slowly exhale through the mouth.
- Regular exercise: make exercise a priority, especially aerobic exercise, a brisk walk, or yoga.
- Appreciation of nature: lie in the sun and feel the warmth; walk among the leaves; watch the snow fall.
- Relaxation: listen to music, practice mediation or mindfulness.
- Healthy, regular meals and opportunity for ample rest.
- A visit with your physician. If you are experiencing multiple physical reactions in your grief, or symptoms such as rapid heartbeat, chest pain, panic attacks, or rapid weight loss, it is imperative to make an appointment with your primary care physician. Bring with you a list of your symptoms and how long you've been having them, your prior medical history, and a list of any other stressors in your life in addition to the loss of your loved one.



HOW HAVEN IS FUNDED

Haven is classified by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. It is funded mainly by donations from individuals in the community who wish to support our work and by those who donate in memory of a loved one. Donations are tax deductible. If you are interested in making a donation, please contact Haven at (703) 941-7000 or at havenofnova@verizon.net



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Winter Schedule

Community Workshop

“Your Journey through Grief”
Saturday, February 8, 2020
2:00 to 4:00 p.m.

Snow day: Saturday, February 15, 2020

Call or email Haven to register

Drop-in Suicide Loss Support Group
1st and 3rd Saturdays of each month
11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Haven also offers individual support. Please call to schedule an appointment. For immediate support without an appointment, a volunteer is available on a walk-in basis Monday through Friday between 10:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.

Contact Information

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Hours of Operation

Monday through Friday
9:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.
www.havenofnova.org

Messages may be left on our voicemail after hours