

PATHWAYS CENTER

for GRIEF & LOSS

COPING WITH ANXIETY WHILE GRIEVING

Anxiety is the feeling of uneasiness or worry resulting from a real or perceived threat or from experiencing an event with uncertain outcomes. Before and after the death of a family member or friend you will experience many changes and face a future filled with many unknowns. Because of this, anxiety is one of the most commonly experienced emotions in grief, which can create great mental, emotional and physical discomfort.

Becoming aware of your increased anxiety and learning ways to manage it will aid you in adjusting to your loved one's death and the changes in your life. It can also leave you feeling more empowered and confident in your ability to cope with your grief. Remember that effectively managing your anxiety takes time, practice, and a commitment to caring for yourself on a daily basis.

Possible Signs of Elevated Anxiety

- Muscle tightness or pain
- Chest tightness and/or elevated blood pressure
- Feeling of racing heart
- Upset stomach, diarrhea, or constipation
- Change in appetite and/or sleep
- Chest tightness; difficulty breathing
- Decreased patience and/or increased irritability or restlessness
- Mood swings
- Difficulty concentrating and/or increased forgetfulness
- Clinging, difficulty with separations
- Waking in the middle of the night, difficulty falling back to sleep

Strategies for Managing Elevated Anxiety

- Become aware of your self-talk (i.e. how you talk to yourself inside your head) and replace negative or worrisome statements with kinder, more realistic ones.
 - **For example, instead of saying to yourself:** *"I'm never going to be able to cope without my husband here to help me, I'm so weak and scared."*
You could say: *"Losing a spouse is a scary experience for everyone. I have made it through difficult times before and I can do it again."*
- Imagine breathing in kindness or sunlight into your body while repeating a comforting phrase:
 - **For example:** *"I will get through this, one moment at a time."*

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- Practice slow, deep belly breathing:
 - Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose, expanding your abdomen as you take in air.
 - Pause momentarily with your abdomen expanded.
 - Exhale through your mouth or nose as your abdomen deflates like a balloon.
 - To help you keep a slow pace, count to four while inhaling (one-two-three-four) and count to four while exhaling.
- Practice a grounding exercise:
 - Pause from your current activity.
 - Sit down in a chair and close your eyes
 - Feel your feet planted firmly on the ground and thank them for their hard work today.
 - Feel your bottom on the chair. Take notice of whether the chair is soft or hard, cold or warm, comfortable or uncomfortable.
 - Feel your arms resting on the arms of the chair or your hands laying gently in your lap. Recall some of the things your arms or hands did for you today.
 - Stretch your neck up toward the sky and allow your shoulder blades to gently fall down your back.
 - Take a deep breath in and exhale out while expanding your chest and heart.
- Take a walk outside in a quiet area. Tune into the sights, sounds, and smells of nature. Take slow, deep belly breaths. Visualize inhaling your peaceful surroundings and exhaling tension.
- Listen to your favorite relaxing music or recording of nature sounds, ocean waves, etc.
- Keep a list of your accomplishments (large and small) and the things for which you are grateful. When you are feeling anxious, focus your attention on the items on your list.
 - Your reflections may also take the form of a prayer.
- Regular physical activity has been proven to decrease anxiety.