

A GENTLE NEUROSCIENCE-INFORMED GUIDE

Grief Explained in the Brain

Ten experiences that can feel frightening, confusing, or "wrong" in grief - and a compassionate way to understand what your brain and nervous system may be doing.

Grief can affect attention, memory, sleep, pain, emotion, and the body's sense of safety. Understanding the biology does not make the loss smaller - but it can make your reactions feel less mysterious.

What your brain may be doing

1

If your grief comes in waves with no warning, that's not instability.

That's your amygdala firing unpredictably because it keeps detecting the absence of someone it was wired to expect.

2

If you feel fine for weeks then completely fall apart, that's not regression.

That's your prefrontal cortex finally lowering its defences once the immediate survival response is over.

3

If you can't concentrate, remember words, or finish sentences while grieving, that's not losing your mind.

That's cortisol and norepinephrine actively impairing hippocampal function - grief physically disrupts memory formation.

4

If your body aches, your chest feels tight, or you feel physically ill, that's not psychosomatic.

That's your anterior cingulate cortex - the same region that processes physical pain - lighting up in response to loss.

5

If you feel angry instead of sad, that's not the wrong reaction.

That's your nervous system choosing fight over freeze because your brain is desperately searching for something it can control.

What your brain may be doing

6

If you keep reaching for your phone to tell them something before remembering, that's not morbid.

That's a prediction circuit your brain built over years that hasn't been updated yet. It takes time to rewrite.

7

If your sleep is completely destroyed even when you're exhausted, that's not insomnia.

That's your threat-detection system refusing to go offline because it's still scanning for the person it lost.

8

If you feel relief after losing someone, even someone you loved deeply, that's not a character flaw.

That's your nervous system exhaling after a prolonged period of anticipatory stress. Relief and love are not opposites.

9

If grief hits hardest at night, that's not weakness.

That's your prefrontal cortex - your rational override - running out of fuel, leaving your limbic system unguarded and your loss unfiltered.

10

If you feel guilty for laughing, enjoying something, or having a good day, that's not betrayal.

That's a nervous system that confused grief with loyalty. Healing was never the opposite of love.

A note about the science: Grief is complex, and no single brain region or chemical explains an experience on its own. These are simplified, neuroscience-informed explanations meant for education and normalization, not diagnosis. Persistent or severe physical, cognitive, or sleep symptoms should also be discussed with an appropriate healthcare professional.