

## Yoga for Grief – Brandi Mundo

Concepts to Consider (Adapted from Hospirus Health-A Foundational Understanding of Grief and Moving and Breathing through Grief)

**Grief** is the natural response to a loss, manifested in ways unique to an individual based on personal experiences, cultural expectations, and spirituality

**Mourning** is the outward social expression of grief and the behavior associated with loss

**Bereavement** encompasses both grief and mourning

### Possible Responses to Grief:

**Physical:** feeling empty inside, nausea, appetite disturbances, tightness in the chest and throat, insomnia, oversensitivity to noise, “nothing seems real,” feeling short of breath, muscle weakness, lack of energy, dry mouth

**Emotional:** sorrow, fear, anger, mood swings, numbness, guilt, anxiety, loneliness, fatigue, helplessness/hopelessness, yearning, and relief

**Thought patterns:** disbelief, confusion, problems making decisions, inability to concentrate, feeling the presence of the deceased

**Behaviors:** crying and frequent sighing, distancing, absentmindedness, dreams of the deceased, keeping the deceased’s room intact, loss of interest in regular life events, wearing objects that belonged to the deceased, alcohol or drug misuse or abuse

**Spiritual:** anger at higher power, acceptance, questioning beliefs, indifference

**Grief can be a roller coaster.** Instead of stages, the grieving process can be full of ups and downs, and highs and lows. It takes time to work through a loss, but the difficult periods should become less intense and shorter with time. Even after years, special events like the birth of a child or a wedding may trigger a strong sense of grief.

(Hospice Foundation of America)

**Factors that Affect Grief:** age, personal relationships, nature of the loss, life circumstances, previous experiences with loss and death, social and economic support, physical health

**Coping:** no single coping strategy works for everyone or for every situation

**Denial:** refusing to accept reality

**Dissociation:** numbing and reduced sense of awareness

**Intellectualization:** not feeling your feelings

**Rationalization:** he/she is better off/not suffering/lived a long life

**Humor:** sharing funny stories, remembering funny things

**Keeping Busy:** occupying your mind, filling time

**Pursuit of Physical Fitness:** any exercise

**Conversion:** unconsciously repressing and transforming emotions into nonorganic symptoms

**Displacement:** taking out on others your feelings about the loss

## A few Common Myths:

**Myth:** The pain will go away faster if you ignore it.

**Fact:** Ignoring pain may only make it worse in the long run.

**Myth:** If you do not cry, it means you are not sorry for the loss.

**Fact:** Crying is not the only expression of sadness. Those who do not cry may feel pain just as deeply as those who do.

**Myth:** Grief should last about a year.

**Fact:** Grief may last longer than expected, and can vary depending upon relationship, current situation, and other contributing factors.

**Myth:** People say things that are inconsiderate and hurtful to grieving persons.

**Fact:** Some people are uncomfortable with grief and say phrases they think will make you feel better. It is best to them know what words are hurtful and what are helpful.

### Less Helpful

- “You are never given more than you can handle” sounds like: “You should have no problem handling this.”
- “They are no longer in pain” sounds like: “You are being selfish for wishing they are still here.”
- Avoid saying “I know how you feel.”

### More Helpful

- Active listening can encourage the identification and expression of emotions
- Silence
- Acknowledge others feelings
- “It sounds like this is really hard.”
- “Tell me more if you like.”

**Cultural Considerations:** culture, family, and religious affiliations influence interpretations of loss and acceptable expressions grief. However, generalizations cannot be made since each individual’s understanding of their culture is unique. Expressions of grief in one culture do not always make sense to people from a different culture. Consider your own personal beliefs related to loss, death, and grieving. Try to understand and appreciate the experiences of others.

### Cross Cultural Variations

- Expression of grief responses
- Rituals or practices surrounding death
- Role of religion and spirituality in coping and afterlife
- Views about suffering

**Why practice yoga for grief?** The body mind experience of yoga facilitates the healing process of emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual symptoms of grief. Pranayama practices enhance the body mind connection, improve focus, slow the flow of negative thoughts, and can slow the heart rate, which soothes the mind.

Iyengar: typical body is dull or defined by preponderance of tamas. Asanas introduce rajas into the system and cause the body to become more vibrant. Then by increasing sattva in the body, it can reflect more Light of the transcendental Self.

Yoga helps us to remember we are not separate from ourselves, our loved ones, humanity, the divine.

### **Asana/Pranayama**

- Consider beginning with more active poses in order to boost energy
- Standing poses are grounding and strengthening
- Backbends are stimulating, open the heart, release the throat and voice
- Simple seated forward folds ease physical and emotional release
- Simple Ujjayi, Brahmari, Nadi Sodhana, Breath of Joy
- Guided relaxation in Savasana

### **Other Considerations**

- Use simple language and leave time for silence
- Maintain a “less is more” attitude, move slowly to support a healing experience
- Frequently give breathing cues/reminders
- In the event of a strong emotional release, resist the urge to “fix or soothe”
- Focus on the internal experience rather than perfecting asana technique
- Use the breath as a safe harbor while navigating difficult emotions
- Offer modifications

**Boundaries** limit and protect the space between the teachers’ power and the students’ vulnerability. Issues include self-disclosure, touch, exchange of gifts, bartering and fees, length and location of sessions, and outside contact.

**Self Care** is essential to avoid compassion fatigue, the physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion that results from seeing people suffer, leading to decreased capacity to show compassion or empathize with suffering people.

- Personal yoga practice
- Self reflection
- Eating well, laughing, exercising, getting enough sleep
- Calming practices: meditation, gratitude reflections, walking, music
- Maintain positive personal and professional relationships
- Set healthy limits

## Resources:

David Mitchell  
Moving and Breathing Through Grief  
Hosparus Health  
502-719-8934  
[www.hosparus.org](http://www.hosparus.org)

Gilda's Club  
[Gildasclublouisville.org](http://Gildasclublouisville.org)

The Dougy Center  
[www.dougy.org](http://www.dougy.org)

- *Grief: A foundational understanding* by Hosparus Health
- *Moving and breathing through grief* in *Techniques of grief therapy: Creative practices for counseling the bereaved* (p.67-69) by David Mitchell
- Transpersonal integrative yoga therapy: A protocol for grief and bereavement in the *International Journal of Yoga Therapy* by Kait Philbin
- *Yoga for Grief and Loss: poses, meditation, devotion, self reflection, selfless acts, ritual* by Karla Helbert
- *Light on Yoga* by B.K.S. Iyengar
- *Yoga for Wellness: Healing with the timeless teachings of viniyoga* by Gary Kraftsow
- *Yoga as Medicine: The yogic prescription for health and healing* by Timothy McCall
- *Yoga for Depression: A compassionate guide to relieve suffering through yoga* by Amy Weintraub
- *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga: Theory and practice* by Georg Feuerstein