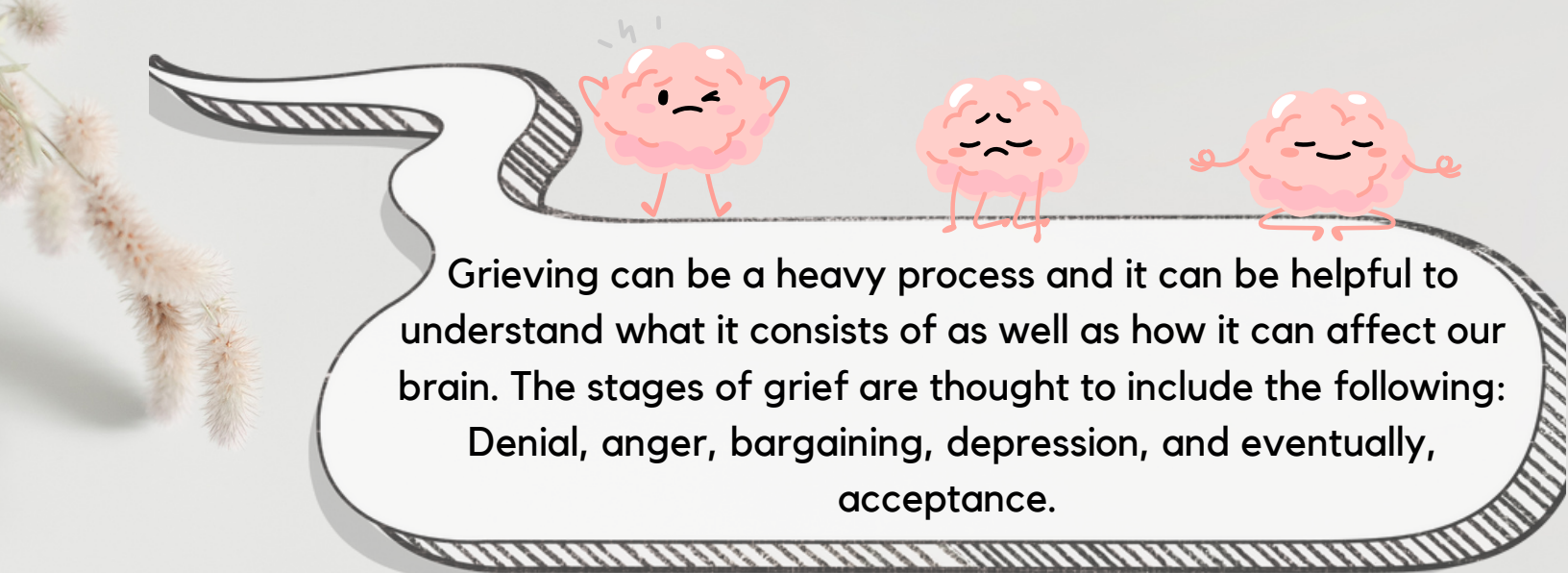


Effect of Grief on the Brain

Article by Hyatt Almarsoumi, LLMSW

There are very few events in life that would be considered a universal human experience, with grief being one of them. It's safe to say that many of us, if not all, do not want to lose those we love, even if we understand that it is an inevitable part of life. While the grieving process following a loss can look different for all of us, the commonality we do share is that nobody can feel our grief for us, only with us.



Grieving can be a heavy process and it can be helpful to understand what it consists of as well as how it can affect our brain. The stages of grief are thought to include the following: Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and eventually, acceptance.

While we won't be going into detail for the stages themselves in this article, it is important to mention that most people who experience the grieving process often don't do so in order.

In fact, many people who have experienced grief usually report that they felt stuck in one of the stages for a bit and/or went through others more than once before reaching acceptance. Any time we experience a stressor, several parts of our brain can be affected.

During grief, the loss that takes place would be the initial stressor, triggering the pituitary gland which is located at the base of the brain and is responsible for making and releasing hormones.

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The hormone released from the pituitary gland sends a signal to the adrenal gland, which then releases the stress hormone we know as cortisol.



Normally, when we experience a temporary stressor, our cortisol levels may spike and then return to normal. However, because grief can be such an intense and constant stressor, especially in the beginning stages, our bodies can remain essentially flooded with cortisol.

However, in some cases, the effects can linger depending on many factors. These factors include but are not limited to the nature of the loss, the number of losses within a short period of time, co-existing mental health conditions, and more

Aside from this, grieving can cause the primitive fear-related areas of our brain such as the amygdala to be overactive, while the limbic system that regulates things like mood and behavior remains underactive.

The effects of grief on the brain are usually temporary and are normally expected to lessen as we adjust to the loss that triggered our grieving process in the first place. .



If you know of someone who is grieving a loss, please don't hesitate to check in on them. Many of us may avoid reaching out to others out of fear of saying the "wrong" thing and we forget that when it comes to something as intense and complex as grief, it's very unlikely that the "right" thing to say even exists.

If you are someone who is experiencing grief themselves, please be kind to yourself and know that you're not alone.

Grief resource: <https://findahelpline.com/countries/us/mi/topics/grief-loss>

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