

Good Grief!

Grief and chronic illnesses are more intricately linked than most people think. Grief has been so misunderstood and ignored that Henry Lew, psychologist, decided it was time for people to meet Grief in person.

Hi, I am GRIEF.

Just thought of dropping you a note about myself.

Most people think that I am only associated with terminal illnesses, deaths and losses. It is no surprise then that I have been often perceived as “bad” since I make my appearance only at unpleasant events.

Having chronic illnesses (e.g. diabetes, hypertension, hyper-lipidermia, arthritis, Parkinson’s disease, congestive-heart failure, stroke, etc) creates a profound impact on a patient’s quality of life. From the first day a patient is diagnosed to when he starts treatment, his world undergoes some or much change and loss. Patients may lose the lifestyle they used to enjoy, the freedom to eat as they like, freedom to spend their time unrestricted by their medication schedule, etc. Some may lose a significant part of their social life. For others who may have previously taken care of others when they were healthy, they lose their caregiving role. Indeed, I come with losses. But be fair to me. I am not the loss. Nor did I cause the loss. In fact, you can still make a difference in your life despite your losses.

I may come in the form of sadness or under the guise of fear, anger, guilt and a host of other emotions. However, when I come knocking on your door, I hope you will be ready to receive me.

- **G**rant permission. **Give me a chance and listen to me.** When you experience a loss, it means one of your needs becomes insufficiently fulfilled. And I am here to tell you which of your needs is lacking because of the loss. The sad thing is most people brush me aside, ignore me, or do things to make themselves happy so that I will go away. Well, it is all right if they have already heard my message. If they ignore my message, they will miss out on what they are lacking in their lives. It is similar to having a bad fall and covering it up with a bandage instead of disinfecting and treating it.
- **O**rganise feelings. I may be very eager and sometimes have difficulty expressing myself that I come in many different emotions. If you organise and sort out the many different feelings you have and **which is the more dominant feeling**, my message is usually behind that feeling.
- **O**rganise feelings. It is understandable that we feel down and things look bleak when our lives are affected by chronic illnesses. Like a coin, **there is always the flip side to every situation**. Remain open to my message and gifts. They will help you see the other side of the situation.
- **D**o-s. It takes a while for any emotion to settle, to accept the situation and to hear out my message. In the meantime, **stay connected** with friends and family who can and are willing to provide you with support and nourish you with love and encouragement. Ensure that your daily routine is as similar to your previous lifestyle as possible so that most of the things you like to do are still there to provide you with some level of joy and satisfaction in life.

What if the one of the following – guilt, rage, insecurity and emptiness - is a dominant feeling? How do we say farewell?

- **G**uilt. You blame yourself for not taking good care of your health. In fact, it probably means you want to **take responsibility** for your health. You can still take responsibility for your health by doing something now, as most chronic illness can be managed by adherence to medication, changes to diet and exercise.
- **R**age. You are angry. Probably asking “Why me?” The illness took away things in your life from you without your permission. It is unfair. You are frustrated with the way things turned out. You want to **take back the control** to set your life and environment in order so that you can make the necessary changes to your diet and physical activities.
- **I**nsecurities. You are fearful of what the future will be, what will happen to your health. Beset with worries, uncertainties and question marks, **you need answers and information**. Find out more from your doctors or allied health professional rather than let the questions run wild in your mind and affect your emotional well-being.
- **E**mptiness. You feel you have lost some things in your life such your freedom and pleasures. You may need to explore and **plan how to maintain the things you like** (e.g. food you like to eat) amidst the changes you are making to your lifestyle. Perhaps allowing yourself to eat a small portion of food that you like once in a while **so that you do not feel that it is totally lost**.
- **F**arewells There are **some things that we need to give up** for better health. For example, if you need to start to exercise on some days, it may mean farewell to being a couch potato after work. To help you bid that lifestyle goodbye, **gradually start** exercising once a week rather than every day or three times week.

I hope you will be more open to me after reading this for I really want to help you. If, however, you have difficulties deciphering the message I bring to you or find it hard to manage the emotions, do consider asking your doctor or a mental health professional for help.

Yours Sincerely,
GOOD GRIEF