

Addressing Chronic Avoidance of Grief

Posted online by What's Your Grief

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Last week we wrote an article about [avoidance behavior in grief](#). No surprise, more than a few people shared that they saw themselves in the description. Our social media comments and DMs blew up with one common question: "I think I'm one of those people engaged in chronic avoidance of grief. What do I do about it?!"

Today we want to answer that tough question – how do you deal with grief avoidance? But if you missed it, read the [avoidance behavior](#) article first (or this article on [understanding avoidance](#)). Today's article isn't nearly as helpful if you haven't read to get a good understanding of avoidance in grief.

Before we dive in, please keep in mind that we're not suggesting you should never engage in some avoidance coping. Quite the opposite – healthy grief often involves [taking breaks](#), which means some balanced avoidance. [The Dual Process Model of Grief](#) even includes that as part of grief! The tips we're sharing today are designed to address avoidance if you're worried it's well beyond the healthy type. Chronic, pervasive avoidance feels useful when coping early in grief but makes it hard to adapt in the long run. So how do you break the habit of avoiding your grief?

Below we've gathered some of our tips for facing your avoidance of grief, along with suggestions from our amazing grief community over on [Instagram](#). This isn't a comprehensive list, but rather a place to get you started. We'd like to keep this list growing, so if you have ideas or suggestions we haven't covered please leave a comment down below.

10 Tips to Stop Avoiding Your Grief

- **Remember that hard emotions are hard, but they aren't bad or dangerous.** It is okay to cry and yell and scream. Remind yourself that it feels excruciating, but you will survive the feelings and you are safe. The more you allow yourself [tolerate the distress of hard feelings](#), the more practiced you become. The emotions are still just as heavy, but actually feeling them is the first step towards slowly getting stronger and better able to carry them.
- **Drop the self judgement.** Sometimes avoidance happens because of the pain of the emotions themselves. But sometimes there is an added layer of pressure that we put on ourselves through judgement, saying things to ourselves like, "It is wrong to feel this way", "I should be dealing with this better", "this shouldn't be so hard", or "I should be over this by now". Remember, there is no timeline for grief

and there are no “shoulds”. [Emotions aren't good or bad, they just are](#). Whatever feelings come up, try to just notice them from a place of curiosity, awareness, and non-judgement.

- **Learn how to self-soothe.** Okay, I know that “self-soothe” is a weird, mental-health-jargon word. But I’m not sure of a better word. “Self-soothing” is just what it sounds like: calming and comforting yourself when you are feeling difficult or uncomfortable things. If you are going to change some of those chronic avoidance patterns and feel difficult feelings, knowing the ways to take care of yourself is important.
- **Identify what you’re avoiding and your avoidance tactics.** If you’re going to cut back on your avoidance and start feeling those grief feelings, the first step is identifying what and how you’re avoiding. Remember, this isn’t about ceasing all avoidance. But it is about increasing an awareness of your avoidance so you can cut back in the places you want or need to while embracing [moderate avoidance for some temporary grief-relief](#). Sometimes you know exactly when and how you’re avoiding. Sometimes it can be sneaky. Considering this list is a place to start:

AVOIDANCE BEHAVIORS IN GRIEF MAY LOOK LIKE . . .

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- 1 ISOLATING YOURSELF FROM PEOPLE, PLACES, & THINGS THAT REMIND THE WORLD IS STILL TURNING WITHOUT YOUR LOVED ONE.
- 2 WORKING ALL THE TIME AND STAYING INCREDIBLY BUSY TO AVOID THINKING OR FEELING
- 3 TAKING CARE OF KIDS, FAMILY, OR FRIENDS TO AVOID ACKNOWLEDGING OR TENDING TO YOUR OWN GRIEF
- 4 USING EXCESSIVE TV, SLEEPING, ALCOHOL, OR OTHER SUBSTANCES TO AVOID THINKING OR FEELING
- 5 STEERING CLEAR OF ANYTHING (EVEN GOOD MEMORIES) THAT REMIND YOU OF YOUR LOVED ONE FOR FEAR OF HARD FEELINGS
- 6 PROCRASTINATING TASKS THAT REMIND YOU OF THE LOSS NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU KNOW THEY NEED TO BE DONE
- 7 EXCESSIVE RUMINATION OR EXCESSIVE WORRYING

- **Ease in when reintroducing yourself to places or things you've been avoiding.** If you haven't dared to open your husband's closet since he died, jumping in to sorting through everything might feel impossible. If you've added twenty extra minutes to your commute to avoid passing your son's former high school, the idea of resuming the old route might cause your entire body to freeze up. Consider breaking things like this down into tiny steps and, if it feels right, enlisting support from others. Invite a supportive friend over and make a plan to simply open one drawer and see how it goes. Be open and prepared for tears. If it is too much, take a break. Maybe you're not even near ready to drive past the school. That's okay. Can you bring it up on google maps street view and just look at it on your screen to start? Once you've done that a few times over a few weeks and started tolerating the feeling of seeing building, can you ask someone else to drive you past the school, with you in the passenger seat? Eventually can you build up to walking past? Then eventually driving, with your friend as a passenger? Hopefully you get the idea.
- **Check yourself for toxic positivity or spiritual bypass.** Sometimes we get messages that we need to use the power of positive thinking or our faith in a higher power to think our way out of difficult feelings. If you've ever thought you just needed to manifest a better mindset or increase your faith to cure those tough grief emotions, you may want to read more about these sneaky forms of avoidance. Don't get us wrong, mindset is important and faith can be a great comfort, but both exist alongside grief. They aren't alternatives to grieving. Read more about [toxic grief here](#) and more about [spiritual bypass here](#).
- **Schedule time for grief.** I can practically hear some of you screaming "I wish I could 'schedule' my grief. Part of the problem is that it comes up out of no where, at the worst times!". Very true. Sometimes the reason our brains become so good at compartmentalizing grief emotions is because of that fear. We worry the feelings will knock us on our ass at the most inopportune times. This is exactly why scheduling time is so valuable. Every week find time to journal, take a walk where you just think and cry, or sit with your grief emotions in some other way. This gives you a safe time to feel, process, express, yell, scream, cry, laugh, and generally practice getting more comfortable with those hard feelings (and the comforting grief feelings too). When feelings come up unexpectedly at inopportune times, give yourself permission to feel them anyway. If that isn't possible, notice the emotion coming up. Say to yourself, "alright, this is a lot and I'm in the middle of a work meeting. But I am going to make a mental note to come back to it tomorrow morning when I'm journaling". This can allow some sense of control without simply stuffing the emotion and never coming back to it.
- **Work with a therapist.** Sometimes scheduling grief time on your own just doesn't cut it. Either you don't hold yourself to it or the emotions feel too overwhelming and scary to process on your own. Either or both of those are wonderful reasons to start [working with a grief therapist](#). This gives you external accountability for creating the space to feel your feelings. It also gives you some

added support and an added prompting to explore some of the feelings that might most be triggering avoidance.

- **Follow grief accounts on social media.** When gathering these suggestions, several people said they found WYG on social specifically to stop their grief avoidance. Social media scrolling can definitely be an avoidance tactic. It is fine in moderation, but a problem if it is preventing you from ever feeling your feelings. Following a few grief accounts or grief hashtags can help you to intersperse a little bit of grief support into your scrolling (you can find us @whatsyourgrief).
- **Reward yourself.** Changing chronic avoidance is tough. Spending time with hard feelings is difficult and draining. Remember to reward yourself with a well-deserved break and some self-care after you've deliberately tended to grief. Schedule in self-care sessions immediately after therapy or following the time when you'll be otherwise spending time with your grief.

Read the article [online](#).