

The First Days

What to expect in the immediate hours and days after a loss.

EVIDENCE-BASED

Shock and Numbness Are Normal

In the hours and days after a death, many people describe feeling numb, disconnected, or as if they are watching their life from outside their own body. This is not a sign that something is wrong with you. Acute grief triggers a stress response that temporarily dampens emotional processing as a protective mechanism.

You may have trouble eating, sleeping, or concentrating. You may forget conversations you just had. You might feel nothing at all, or you might cry without warning. All of these responses are documented in bereavement research as completely normal acute grief reactions.

There is no timeline for when this numbness lifts. For some it is days; for others it takes weeks. Let yourself feel whatever you are feeling without judgment.

Source: PMC — The Many Faces of Grief (Illness, Crises, and Loss, 2021), <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9637829/>

Practical Tasks in the First 48 Hours

What needs attention soon:

- Notify close family and friends
- If the death was at home, the hospice team will guide you through next steps
- Contact a funeral home (if not already arranged)
- Secure the home and any medications

What can wait:

- Thank-you cards, social media posts, financial paperwork
- Sorting through belongings or making major decisions
- Returning to work (most employers offer bereavement leave)

Ask someone you trust to help manage phone calls and logistics. Accepting help is not weakness — it is survival.

Sleep, Eating, and Basic Self-Care

Grief is physically exhausting. Bereavement research shows that bereaved individuals commonly experience disrupted sleep, appetite loss, fatigue, and weakened immune function in the first weeks

after a loss.

- Eat something, even if you are not hungry — small, simple meals
- Stay hydrated — dehydration worsens fatigue and confusion
- Rest when you can — if you cannot sleep, lying down still helps
- Move gently — even a short walk can help regulate your nervous system

You do not need to be strong right now. You need to take care of your body so it can carry you through what comes next.

If you need someone to talk to right now:

[NHPCO Grief Support: 1-800-658-8898](https://www.nhpc.org/grief-support) | [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Call or text 988](https://www.988lifeline.org/)