

Persistent Grief Nearly Doubles Your Risk of Death Over 10 Years

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Persistent grief symptoms nearly doubled the risk of death within 10 years, showing that unresolved grief has serious long-term health effects
- › People with high levels of grief were far more likely to use antidepressants, sedatives, and anxiety medications for years after their loss
- › Frequent doctor visits remained elevated for up to seven years in those experiencing unrelenting grief, highlighting the strain it places on both mind and body
- › Long-lasting grief keeps stress hormones high, weakens your immune system, disrupts sleep, and increases your risk of chronic disease
- › Taking steps like honoring your unique grieving process, supporting your body with sleep, healthy diet, and exercise, and using techniques like the Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) helps you move through grief and protect your long-term health

Nearly doubling your risk of death over a 10-year period is not something most people would ever link to grief, but that is exactly what new research has found. Scientists writing in *Frontiers in Public Health* tracked 1,735 bereaved relatives for a decade and discovered that those who experienced persistent, intense grief were almost twice as likely to die compared to those whose grief symptoms were low and stable.

Grief, meaning the natural emotional response to loss, is often characterized by overwhelming sadness, yearning, anger, numbness, or difficulty functioning in daily life. For most, those feelings begin to ease over months. But when grief remains intense and unrelenting, it becomes more than just an emotional burden. Symptoms include insomnia, depression, anxiety, loss of appetite, chronic stress, and social withdrawal. Left untreated, this state undermines both mental and physical health.

Understanding this long-term risk changes how you think about loss. Grief is not simply something to "get through." It requires attention, care, and support, especially when symptoms remain strong over time. That brings us directly to the new findings from this compelling study that tracked grief patterns and revealed their profound effect on long-term health.

Grief Leaves Long Shadows on Health and Longevity

For the study, published in *Frontiers in Public Health*, researchers followed people who had lost a loved one to natural causes and analyzed how their grief evolved over time.¹ The goal was to map different grief patterns and see whether certain trajectories were linked to long-term health problems.

- **A small group faced the heaviest burden** – The study found that 6% of participants experienced what researchers called a "high grief trajectory," meaning their grief symptoms remained severe and unrelenting for years. This group looked very different from those whose grief naturally declined over time. They had more doctor visits, more prescriptions, more mental health service use, and nearly twice the risk of death compared to people in the low-grief group.
- **Health services became a lifeline but didn't solve the problem** – Those with persistent grief symptoms had almost three times the likelihood of using mental health services such as therapy. Yet despite this, their symptoms remained high and their long-term health outcomes were worse, suggesting that current treatment approaches were not enough.

- **Doctor visits remained elevated for years** — General practitioner visits for the high-grief group stayed significantly above normal for up to seven years after the loss. This wasn't a short-term response to crisis — it was a prolonged pattern of seeking medical help. Interestingly, out-of-hours doctor calls were also higher during years four through six, showing that distress often spilled into emergencies outside normal office hours.
- **Use of medication was much higher** — Compared to those with low grief symptoms, the high-grief group was over five times more likely to use **antidepressants** and more than twice as likely to use sedatives or anxiety drugs. This heavy reliance on **psychotropic medication** highlights just how overwhelming their symptoms were, and how difficult it was to manage them with standard care.

The Toll of Grief Stretched Far Beyond the First Year

The research followed participants for a full decade and showed that the impact of grief stretched much further than most people imagine. While most people began to heal emotionally after the first few years, those locked into persistent grief had a different trajectory. Their higher risk of illness and death lasted well past the immediate aftermath of bereavement.

- **Stress hormones kept the body locked in survival mode** — While the Frontiers in Public Health study did not investigate biological stress directly, ongoing grief keeps your body's stress response switched on.²

This means stress hormones such as cortisol stay elevated for long periods.

Chronically high cortisol disrupts sleep, weakens your immune defenses, and accelerates aging. Over time, your body wears down under the strain, creating a biological pathway from unresolved grief to physical illness.

- **Your immune defenses weaken** — The study itself did not measure infections or immune changes, but when stress hormones remain high, your immune system struggles to do its job.³ This makes you more vulnerable to everyday illnesses and

slows down healing. It offers one possible explanation for why people with long-lasting grief in the study had higher death rates over the 10-year follow-up period.

- **Healthy routines often fall apart** — Although the study did not track lifestyle habits, other evidence suggests that when grief becomes overwhelming, everyday self-care slips away.⁴ It's harder to eat well, exercise, or sleep consistently when sadness and yearning dominate daily life. Unhealthy eating, poor sleep, and lack of movement add an extra layer of physical strain, compounding the emotional burden of grief.
- **You're not alone in this struggle** — If you recognize yourself in this description — persistent sadness, difficulty functioning, or relying on medications years after a loss — it's important to know that you're not alone. More importantly, these findings prove that grief is not something to ignore or simply "tough out."

Your Grief Is Unique to You

Grief touches every part of your life, but it doesn't have to control your future. If your loss feels overwhelming and you sense that you're stuck in it, there are steps you can take to release the weight. What works for one person is not always the same for another, and that's important to remember — your grieving process belongs to you. Healing isn't about erasing the memory of someone you lost, it's about creating space for life again. Here are five steps to move forward:

1. **Allow your grief to be yours** — Don't force yourself into stages or a timeline. If you're not angry, that's fine. If you don't feel denial, that's fine too. Whatever you feel is valid. Instead of judging your emotions, give them permission to exist. Simply knowing your grief is unique makes it easier to stop comparing yourself to others.
2. **Give your body and mind real support** — Emotional stress is much harder to bear when your body is worn down. **Exercise** is one of the most effective ways to lift your mood and strengthen your resilience. If you're not someone who enjoys structured workouts, even **walking daily** eases tension. Meditation and yoga are powerful tools that bring calm and help regulate your nervous system.

- 3. Feed your mood with the right fuel** – What you eat plays a direct role in how you feel. A nutrient-rich diet helps your brain chemistry balance, making it easier to process loss. Without this foundation, it's almost impossible to feel emotionally stable. Make whole foods, protein, and balanced carbs part of your day, and avoid **ultraprocessed foods**, which are loaded with vegetable oils, and alcohol, which only disrupt your healing.
- 4. Protect your sleep as if your health depends on it** – **Poor sleep** magnifies grief and makes emotional healing drag on. Set a bedtime routine and stick to it. Limit blue light at night, keep your bedroom cool and dark, and aim for consistent wake and sleep times. Even small improvements in sleep quality restore your mental clarity and emotional strength.
- 5. Use the Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) to dissolve stuck emotions** – **EFT** works like emotional acupuncture without the needles. By tapping with your fingertips on specific points, you balance your energy system and release emotional pain. You can learn the basics on your own, but if you're experiencing complicated grief, working with an experienced EFT practitioner gives you extra guidance. This tool helps you move past what feels impossible and reconnect with hope.

FAQs About Intense Grief

Q: How does grief affect your long-term health?

A: Persistent, intense grief doesn't just affect your emotions – it raises your risk of serious health problems. Research shows that people with high, unrelenting grief symptoms are nearly twice as likely to die within 10 years compared to those with lower grief levels.⁵ The stress of unresolved grief also increases doctor visits, reliance on medications, and overall vulnerability to illness.

Q: What symptoms should I look for to know if my grief is prolonged?

A: Prolonged grief is marked by ongoing sadness, yearning, numbness, or difficulty functioning in daily life long after the loss. Other common signs include insomnia, lack of appetite, depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal. If these symptoms don't ease over time and feel constant, you may be stuck in a high-grief state.

Q: Why is grief linked to physical illness and death?

A: Unresolved grief keeps stress hormones elevated, disrupts sleep, weakens immunity, and increases inflammation. Over time, these changes wear your body down, making you more prone to heart disease, infections, and chronic illness. The combination of emotional strain and poor health behaviors creates a clear path from grief to physical decline.

Q: What steps can I take to support myself through grief?

A: Focus on giving your mind and body the right foundation for healing. Allow yourself to grieve in your own way without comparison. Support your body with exercise, meditation, and yoga. Eat nutrient-rich foods to stabilize your mood, protect your sleep routines, and consider EFT to release stuck emotions.

Q: How long does grief usually last before it improves?

A: For most people, the intensity of grief naturally lessens within about six months, although the sadness never fully disappears. If your symptoms remain strong for a year or more and disrupt your ability to live daily life, that's a sign you need additional support. Grief is unique to you, but it should gradually shift over time rather than remain as raw as the first days.

Sources and References

- ^{1, 5} [Frontiers in Public Health July 25, 2025](#)
- ² [Dialogues Clin Neurosci. 2012 Jun;14\(2\):129–139](#)
- ³ [Frontiers in Psychiatry December 3, 2020](#)
- ⁴ [Focus \(Am Psychiatr Publ\). 2021 Jun 17;19\(2\):161–172](#)