

Healthy Grieving Guide to Death and Dying

An Elemental Journey through Intense Grief

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A firsthand look at the elemental forces at work, and a possible outline of ways a person might elicit a healthy and sustainable process. Suggestions for supporters and caregivers who might act as guides along the path.

Our bodies are composed of a combination of the Five Elements.

ETHER - Also known as space, ether is the space between all things, that which connects all while simultaneously having no physical presence itself, is the absence of the other elements. Origins, the primordial, that which came before and that which remains after, the most subtle. Associated with sound, the original “om”. When we contemplate that which remains after life has extinguished, when we feel the emptiness that remains after loss of a loved one, when we experience the abyss, that is ether. Ether is also that which keeps us connected to our loved one and that which we tap into to reach the all-one-consciousness. Cold, dry, subtle, still.

AIR - That which moves. The wind that stirs us, that brings change, that which depletes. Erratic in nature, air represents extremes, and can quickly oscillate between one extreme and another. Air moves our blood through our arteries and veins, conducts our nerve fibers, and quickens the mind. Air is inspiration, and the breath of life, and when it comes to a still, takes life with it - expiration. When change comes suddenly, when the broken mirror fragments of anxious thought confuse, distract, and distort our perception. Wind can either blow out or blow up a fire. Cold, dry, subtle, mobile.

FIRE - That which burns and brings heat. Fire governs the fire of the belly, the fire of the mind, the transformative, metabolic intelligence of each cell of the body. Fire is the light of the sun, the heat of the hearth, and the slow warmth of compost. Fire is the sharpness of the tongue, the wit, and the mind. It is the fire of rage, anger, and criticism. Fire is present in inflammation, infection, and fever, and also in the sharpness of a blade or bullet. Fire shines the light of faith and brings inner vision to the mind’s eye. Hot, dry, subtle, sharp.

WATER - That which moistens. Water is the liquid flow of our emotions, our tears, our sweat, and the fluids that make up the majority of our physical beings. The waters of the womb, the breast, the lymph, the phlegm, and the blood; that which is pulled by the

moon and fluctuates with the tides. Water is that which nourishes life. It is also that which drowns and washes away, and that which softens, quenches, or extinguishes the fire. That which nourishes. Cold, wet, heavy, soft, gross.

THE AYURVEDIC DOSHAS

The ancients recognized three common combinations of the elements in living beings and living systems, called Doshas: Vata, Pitta, and Kapha. While all individuals are made of all three doshas, or more of these doshas can be predominant in any particular person. This knowledge can be especially illuminating when people are under duress during the grieving process, as it may help predict what particular challenges a person may face, what behaviors and imbalances may surface during this stressful time, and what particular remedies, herbs, foods, and practices may help to balance them.

VATA

Elements: Ether and Air. *Qualities:* Cold, dry, erratic, tense, subtle

Common Emotional Imbalance: Fear

Common Physical Imbalance: Pain

Increased by: Bitter, Astringent, and strongly Pungent tastes

Alleviated by: Sweet, Sour, Salty, and mildly Pungent tastes

Vata persons have incredible imaginations, can sometimes easily let go of attachments, can make subtle connections that others hadn't seen, and can be clairsentient and spirit filled.

When stressed, vatas may seek distraction, may exhibit erratic behavior, and can become extremely depleted. They are prone to fatigue and digestive upset, losing their appetites easily and sometimes wasting away under duress. Restlessness, insomnia, anxiety, loneliness, and a shaky faith.

PITTA

Elements: Fire and Water. *Qualities:* Hot, moist, sharp, subtle

Common Emotional Imbalance: Anger

Common Physical Imbalance: Inflammation

Increased by: Pungent, Salty, and strongly Sour tastes

Alleviated by: Sweet, Astringent, and Bitter tastes

Pitta folk are blessed with clear vision, leadership, concentration, discipline.

Under stress, they may fall victim to masking their grief by staying busy, conducting business with a perfectionist or critical attitude, anger with self or others, fixation, stubbornness.

KAPHA

Elements: Earth and Water. *Qualities:* Cold, moist, heavy, dull, static, sticky, cloudy

Common Emotional Imbalance: Depression

Common Physical Imbalance: Mucus/Stagnation

Increased by: Sweet, Sour, and Salty tastes

Alleviated by: Pungent, Bitter, and Astringent tastes

Kapha people are often endowed with a deep sense of faith, which can be of incredible support through the grieving process. They may show their love through feeding people and generous offerings of self.

When under stress, they may also tend towards overeating, cravings for sweet and salt (leading to water retention), oversleeping, and may become “stuck” in the heaviness of grief, leading to depression, torpor, and inactivity. Inertia.

According to the Tibetans, in the dying process, the Elements break down and deteriorate in a pattern:

- First to begin breaking down is Earth. The Body Structure breaks down, bones may become very brittle and break, muscles atrophy.
- Second to go is Water, which recedes. Bodily fluids, urinary system starts to go awry
- Next is Fire, which rises to lift the Spirit. Infection may occur, or body become suddenly hot, sweaty or red-tinged
- Air then diminishes, and we hear the lungs struggling and death rattles, raking or last breath can be heard.
- Ether element then spins away, taking Spirit rising above the body with that last breath.

In a sudden tragic death, this may happen within the span of 10-20 minutes.

Death should not be medicalized, it's not a medical problem

The Five Senses

The etheric quality of grief, of emptiness, disconnection, and loss, can have a dissociative effect on us, causing us to lose grounding and lose our own perception of our own bodies and their needs. Our senses provide a route back in if we've lost our way.

Our senses also need food, and just like with our bellies, we have a choice to feed them quality nourishment or toxic crud.

HEAR - ether

Plants, music, inner voice/wisdom, bells, heartbeats, water, wind, fire, silence, voices, mantra, chanting, singing, prayer, meditation, spirits, ideas, stories

TOUCH/FEEL - wind

Massage, body oils/pastes, baths, swimming, water, fire, textures, cold/hot, cuddles, being naked and feeling air on your body, wind, handicrafts, feelings, love, dance, running, exercise, lifting weights, energy, qi, prana, yoga, tai chi, energy work

SEE - fire

Beauty, colors, art, nature, plants, landscapes, water, mountains, desert, yantras, light, sun, moon, stars, space, planets, insight, clarity, shadows, imagination, vision

TASTE -water

Foods, teas, herbs, soil, water, our own taste, skin, sustenance, tears, salt

SMELL - earth

Plants, soil, landscapes, bodies, essential oils, food, smudge/smoke

The Calendar of Grief

MOON CYCLE

When the phase of the moon returns to the phase it was at when your loved one departed, your body will remember and the pain may be physical.

MOON 1-3: THE END AND THE BEGINNING

VATA (air and ether)

MOON 4-6: FIRE AND TRANSFORMATION

PITTA (fire and water)

MOON 7-9: EMBODY AND SUSTAIN

KAPHA (water and earth)

MOON 10-13: INTEGRATION, BEGINNING AGAIN

Moon 1-3 VATA

Physical detachment from attachment to the physical form. Start and Beginning. Extreme lightness of body and deeply engaged spiritual connection but also spaciness, forgetfulness

- Attempt minimal work, brain functions are minimal due to shock. Try not to drive solo or operate heavy machinery.
- Oleanate often, sit on rocks, by a river or lake, soak in ocean, watch the waves, receive bodywork, walk in the forest, sauna, keep electrolytes up, eat extraordinarily good food high in protein and magnesium, be close to the 5 elements, build fires and burn things.
- Release objects that trigger, refresh and renew the home. Sweep, clean, purge, release.
- Bad time to imbibe alcohol “spirits”, as you will fly too high and possibly be unable to return to earth. Numbing the pain will only make it worse when you finally “feel it”.
- Memory will be vague due to the trauma. Make no life-changing decisions during this time.

The First Week: Death and Immediately After Shock, Decisions, Logistics

Day 1 & 2: Death - the end and the beginning

Treat for SHOCK.

Symptoms are very similar to a Traumatic Brain Injury(TBI). People will be disoriented and confused, and the conscious thought process aren't functioning properly. An attentive and grounded support person who can drive is essential.

Give Homeopathics:

- Ignatia amara
- Aconitum

For the wild-eyed shock pulse-pounding of the heart:

- Gelsemium

5-Flower essence, electrolyte replacement, magnesium rich foods, coconut water, oil soles of feet and scalp before bed.

Sleep will be fitful if at all; decoct Ashwagandha in milk with honey and ghee.

The manner of death will make a difference in how these days are experienced. Sudden death and death after chronic illness may be metabolized in different ways.

Day 3&4- Murky, Hazy, Amniotic-like fluid surrounds. Tasks abound.

Intensity: Highest Level

- Research burial or cremation options.
- Get salt on board; HYDRATE! Tears are plenty. Rescue Remedy spray, pastilles, candies are great.
- Ground the energy and intensity with ritual, candles, smoke, sensory
- Employ mugwort or epsom salt footbaths for grounding.
- Continue to treat for TBI: Gotu Kola, Lion's Mane,

- Pure, light foods that are easy to digest, enough to keep energy going, no heavy meals.
- Put up a ½ gallon of marshmallow root cold infusion; will soothe ragged mucous membranes and roiling bellies. Store in fridge and take ½ cup per day straight or with other beverages.
- Upcoming questions: WHO handles your loved one's body? Who leads ceremony?

Logistical/Legal/Safety Concerns Depending on where your loved one died, you may or may not be offered control over preparations after death. That being said, you usually have the right to handle the body of your love one yourself - however you may need to advocate for it. It is extremely helpful to have a caregiver who is more distant from the active grief to advocate for the family to the hospital, morgue or funeral home staff and make arrangements.

Day 5: Body Preparation, Cremation or Burial

Intensity drops briefly, sleep and rest is super important so people don't get sick.

Walking is helpful; go to the mountains, and get up high and look around, off into the distance. Important to begin moving the body more, get the lungs pumping, and keep the lymph flowing like a river.

Find and surround yourself with people who can actively hold space for you and your family in a strong way. Make sure accommodations are supportive and comfortable for everyone joining the circle.

Get hands and feet in the earth, roll in river mud, begin gathering ceremonial herbs. Now is the time to actively midwife your beloved back over the threshold. For parents losing children- we're releasing cords and hooks from the heart, womb, breasts, from our own bodies that created the beings.

- Ignatia amara homeopathic for cutting the cord, letting go.

Preparing the Body

- Washing the body, dressing the body, flowers, chanting, ritual, sacred space
- Resins & Herbs for Crossing Over: Amber, Rose, Lotus, Nag Champa
- Bells and chanting
We can offer our plant medicines up with the fire to the spirits - classical allies include frankincense, myrrh, palo santo, copal, juniper, sage, lotus, sage,
- Anoint the body with sacred scents, adorn with sacred beads and objects, favorite hat, scarf, jewelry
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Drawing Upon Our Inner Strength

Find ways to nurture your body in preparation for opening up to the public and receiving their grief.

Allow yourself to receive loving touch, and build up your inner earth element to give you stamina and resilience for the times to come.

Some ideas can include receiving massage from a professional or a loved one, get footbaths & nails done, visit hot springs, go swimming, float in the water, take a long bath, sit by a water fountain, look at art.

Immersion in water is especially helpful at this time of extreme aggravation of Vata.

Some may relish retail therapy, a spa visit, a mud wrap, tracking down precious items to offer to the ceremony.

Taking the time to “check out” a bit, helps us draw inward and gather a bit of strength for the ceremonies ahead. We can’t flow if we don’t ebb.

Three-times-daily herbal formulas, rotated:

- Albizia, Avena, Crataegus, Scutellaria, Peonia, Melissa glycerite, Leonurus, Licorice, Schizandra glycerite
- Pedicularis, Matricaria, Avena, Crataegus cordial, peach leaf cordial
- Aralia calif, Eleutherococcus or Panax quinquefolium, Turnera

diffusa, Lavender, Passiflora, Piper, Matricaria, Rose glycerite

- Cordials and syrups are ideal. Tasting good, ease of administering is important during grieving.

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Day 6 & 7: Preparations for Ceremony, Memorial Celebrations, Wake

Engage: SOUND, SIGHT, SCENT, FEELING, MOVEMENT in your active grief, in your time with the body of your loved one, so that every part of your consciousness, senses, and spirit can acknowledge and integrate the initiation of grief and the truth of the death. This time is psychedelic, and we need to feed the spirits and send the loved one on their journey through unknown territory.

WAKES: Practiced around the world, a wake is a practice of standing vigil with the body of your loved one. This can take place in the comfort of one's home safely and legally. In the modern wake, often a table or casket is outfitted/packaged with dry ice, and the body of the loved one is laid upon the ice, keeping the body at a safe and sanitary temperature that can be maintained for 3 days or so.

Build a bonfire. Release photos, objects, emotions - start "squeezing the towel".

The time to grieve is NOW. Do not suppress or ignore your mourning reactions. If you do, your feelings will be like smoldering embers, which may later ignite and cause a more dangerous explosion. Anguish, like ecstasy, is not forever.

Wring out, "Squeeze the Towel"

Grief settles in the body and tears crystallize, becoming a hardened mass that is a substrate for future pathologies to grow from. The lungs are the seat of Kapha, the storehouse of mucous in our body, and it's important to keep the lungs warm and expanding to counter this tendency.

When grief (or any emotion) is ignored, or stuffed down inside and not allowed natural emotive expression through the voice, those forms become

the seeds of dis-ease. Fluid lymph=easy tears.

The Second Week

Day 8,9,10: Rest, travel, rest, get massage, acupuncture. Get in body. Plan a trip to the sea

Day 11, 12: Prepare and plan for a memorial event, legacy illustration. Connect with people who can help review photos, handle logistics with food and visitors, neglected chores at home. Swim, sauna, massage, acupuncture, cranial sacral.

Day 13: Memorial, ritual, ceremony. *The number 13 is sacred in ancient female-dominant/goddess traditions. 13 symbolizes death and the birth of the spirit, death of a struggling period and a new beginning. There are 13 scutes on Turtle's back, and 13 moon cycles in a year.*

Day 14: FIRE. Burn some things. Pitta may rise, there may be deep, rageful feelings of anger at the loss.

Day 15,16,17: Rest, pay bills, take care of home and business, get massage, take a hike or walk in forest.

Secure connections/make future appointments with grief support: group, social worker, therapist.

- EMDR/tapping for PTSD with a competent and experienced therapist who as a guide is asking the right questions to lead you through the process.
- Somatic psychotherapy, Hakomi

Weeks 3&4

Journey to the Sea

Travel with a friend or partner who can support you and guide you, cook for you and make decisions. Go to the ocean to grieve, the waves pulse and cleanse our body and mind, the salt water is our blood of our mother and soothes us, heals us. Islands or some remote coastline where you can be in solitude. Turtles remind us of having a hard protective shell on our backs.

If you can't travel: Salt lamp, salt scrubs, sea salt in bathtub to mimic the sea, ocean wave soundtrack.

Practice BREATHING. Breathe in the dark and breathe out the light. When you breathe out, imagine your chest cavity is filled with white light like the moon reflects, and breathe that white light back into the world.

The LEGACY of your loved one is what you must practice daily. All their best qualities must be put forth.

In periods of stress, you need time to rest your body and your mind. You need to be by yourself or with a close circle of support. Solitude is the glory of being alive. In Solitude you find time to think and take stock of your life.

"For modern people needing to grieve but having no culture in which to really do it, this older community of the wide beautiful fish-filled ocean is the water of all grief and will be as close to a tribe that listens as they're probably going to get."

-Martin Prechtel The Smell of Rain on Dust pg 48

Moon 4- PITTA

Progression and the ability to endure. Finding Stability.

- Brain functions begin to return, begin re-integrating work schedule.
- Anger and resentment may rise to the surface.
- Adrenals are depleted from the shock and trauma so a guided trip where your basic needs will be taken care of; logistics and food, is ideal. Hard physical exertion is indicated, something deeply sensorial

and immersive like snorkling or diving, stargazing or candle magic. Go off-grid and reset the circadian rhythm, aquire deep restorative sleep in the Dark and Quiet. Be close to the pulse and pull of the tides, sleep by the gently lapping sea or lake, the gurgling brook or creek, or water fountain in the bedroom.

- Keep “squeezing the towel”.
- Stare at the center of a candle flame for 5 minutes at dusk.

The way to feel better isn't to avoid the anger, it's better to paint your heart onto the canvas of life and witness the crack leaking something so strong not even a bathtub of tea can mask the smell.

-Frieda Kahlo

Moon 5- Chaos & Creation, Breaking down form, Erosion

By the 5th moon you should be fairly clear of the deep grief if indeed you have done your work and put your face in the wind and pressing in/squeezing the towel. Your thoughts and memories of your loved one may still visit on a daily basis but you can begin to divert your thoughts into affections and appreciation.

Moon 5 is a bit of a stasis point, so remember to keep breathing.

“If you want to sing with angels, you gotta dance with ghosts”-Danny Dollinger

Moon 6- Coming Together

- Be wary of anxiousness, triggers, PTSD symptoms developing. Increase your awareness so as to notice such things.
- Get grief support. Receive shirodhara (continuous stream of warm sesame oil to the third eye for 30 minutes)
- Form and function can return to your life if you have adequately processed, or even if you haven't, you should be able to perform most tasks and when encountered in the grocery store, the tears fall easily but dropping into the grief isn't accompanied by a giant sucking sound requiring a day of bed rest to recover from.

- Long walks or hikes several times a week are crucial.
- At the end of this moon phase, you may find the strength to clean your loved one's space.
- Physical reaction may hit 3-5 days later.

"...2000-3000 years of repression and a culturally endorsed incapacity with grief." Martin Prechtel

Moon 7

Divine realm. Kapha. Higher Existence

- Give other people your memories, pass on tangible items that they will infuse with love in memory. (Energetic grieving- they do some of the work for you!)
- Our intentions shape the world- do spiritual journeying, visit sacred places, walk medicine trails, see amazing art, witness spectacular performances. Seize the day! These are all things we should do frequently anyway in our short time here in these human flesh bodies.
- Be prepared for "slip outs".
- Companion animals may be important- dogs, cats, bunnies, horses. Depression is a danger.
- There may be days you are under a heavy heavy wet blanket that's hard to crawl out from under.
- Psychedelic therapeutics could be indicated here, as an alternative to Sunday drinking. Communing with the mentally powerful herbs could support Kapha by keeping the energy going upward.
- Lithium-rich hotsprings may be indicated for those trending toward depression.

Darkness has a hunger that's insatiable. Lightness has a call that's hard to hear.. -Indigo Girls

Herbs to Elicit Deep Breathing, cut through Kapha

- Inula- Elecampagne
- Eriodictyon- Yerba Santa
- Aconitum columbianum -Aconite
- Ligusticum- Osha (only rescue-harvested or cultivated please!!!)
- Grindelia- Gumweed
- Balsamorhiza- Balsam root
- Aralia racemosa or californica- Spikenard or California Ginseng
- Monarda
- Anenome patens- Windflower
- Asarum caudatum or any of the Aristolochias- Wild Ginger

Moon 8- Infinity, Breaking barriers, Restructuring

- Put fresh flowers on the altars.
- Push into new territory.
- Make a photo collage of the loved one, replace photos on the altar, create memories from trinkets or clothing.
- Energetic flow begins to return, you may feel like yourself on some days.

Moon 9- Completion, Ending, Universe, Alignment. Oak

First Grieving cycle complete. 82 more moons (6 years) to go.

- Perform a self-care ritual, take 3-4 days at a hot springs or a series of sweats, saunas, bodywork, meals. Get that towel squeezed out.
- If news of another's passing arrives, take time to drop in with the emotion and be prepared to "go off the rails" for a bit. Take care of any unfinished business.
- Formulas can stop. New ones can be made, but the herbs have done their work.

Moon 10- Completion. Beginning Again

- Build and strengthen your body. Take a longer more strenuous hike than usual or 4-day campout.
- Ask for help with a lingering project, call on your community to check in some way.
- Get hugs, your physical body will crave the presence of your loved one.
- Grief begins to take on a familiar form, almost like a stuffy hidden inside your body that you can pull out, look at, wash off, placate and soothe, and replace.
- Sage, purify, cleanse your space
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Moon 11- Sweet Memory Moon

- Laughter comes more easily
- Continue to reach out into the scary dark places.
- Remember breathing.
- Reset the electrical connection; receive Polarity, Acupuncture, Rolfing.
- Build fires, acknowledge planetary seasonal cycles, continue to guard against physical injury- be aware of self-protection and the need to continue to rest and go slow.
- Get on the water, go to a yoga retreat, or similar where the mind can rest and integrate with the body.
- You may finally have a lock on what triggers and debilitates you.
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Moon 12- Rebound

Brain almost wants to forget, body wants to curl up into a ball.

It's been a long year. Physical reaction is profound to the day.

Find things to do that INSPIRE.

Moon 13- Turtle's shell complete

- Anticipate and plan for the cellular memory of the shock event to return in many manifestations.
- Carefully strategize and plan out the activities surrounding the days around the moon phase AND the Gregorian date. Community members will remember the date so make yourself empty now that you may receive their grief. They have been holding space for you and now you must receive for them, reach down and pull it out again, squeeze that towel.
- The brain wants to forget, protectively. Continue with healing distractions.

Death brings you a choice. It can lead you to the edge of the abyss, or you can build a bridge that will span the chasm.

Herbs for Standing Strong in the Face of Fear

- Fouquieria splendens, Ocotillo- for the emotional heart
- Ailanthus altissima, Tree of Heaven, chun bai pi
- Verbena, Blue Vervain- for visual hauntings
- Leonurus, Motherwort- anxiety, panic, fear
- Borago, Borage- for courage, renews tears, opens crown chakra
- Verbascum, Mullein- root opens lungs
- Sequoia sempervirens, Redwood- 300 feet in height, stout trunks

Herbs to treat Overwhelm/Nervous Exhaustion

- Scutellaria- Skullcap- overwhelm, mildly sedating
- Avena sativa- Milky Oats- nervous exhaustion- safe for babies to elders, reliable nervous system sedative
- Matricaria- Chamomile- 4-teabag strength for sleeplessness. Anti-anxiety properties, CNS/Sensory effects, binds to GABA receptors
- Eschscholzia- California Poppy- calming, anti-inflammatory
- Lactuca- Wild Lettuce- Hypnotic sedative
- Olive FE- physical and emotional exhaustion
- Other: Rhodiola, Alder, Willow, Hawthorn

Bigger guns for Nervous System Support:

- Corydalis-Yanhuso- 1% strength that of opium
- Rauwolfia serpentina
- Pedicularis, Kava, Melissa, Valerian, Vervain
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Herbs to restore tears, support the eyes

- Lonicera- Honeysuckle
- Prunella- Self Heal
- Viola-Violet
- Evening Primrose
- Heuchera- Alum root
- Anaphylis- Pearly Everlasting
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Healing from Brain Trauma

- Hericeum- Lion's Mane
- Centella asiatica- Gotu Kola
- Rosemarinus- Rosemary- (caution)
- Curcuma- Turmeric
- Foods: Avocado, coconut, flax, Vit A, Omega 3 fats, Tropical fruits, sweet potatoes, carrots, dried apricots, dark leafy greens, salmon

Possible comfort foods:

- Tapioca pudding- sweet, easy to digest, can make with coconut milk, add fruit
- Coconut water- ideally from fresh young coconuts (can buy by the case)
- Bone Broth, warm soups, casseroles
- Nut butters, tahini dressings, unctuous sauces like guacamole
- Smoothies- great for masking some flavors of additives like spinach, kale
- Easy to digest power bites: soaked dates, cashews, figs, rolled in coconut.
- Kitchari- perfect protein, easy to digest, spices good for digestion

Natural Burial information & resources:

- Green Burial Council website for great guides and other resources: greenburialcouncil.org
- 300 providers in the US & Europe, since 1 provider in 2006.
- Doorway Into Light, Haiku, Maui. The Death Store. Green Burial Council standards for funeral home certification.