

THE CARE COURIER

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Your Brain on Grief: The Science of Love, Loss, and Learning to Live Again

Every week in grief groups someone eventually asks the same quiet question: “Is something wrong with me?” People describe forgetting simple things, feeling disoriented in familiar places, struggling to sleep, or suddenly breaking into tears at the grocery store. Many worry they are losing control of their mind. In reality, something far more understandable is happening. Their brain is grieving.

For generations grief was described mostly through emotional or spiritual language. Today neuroscience is helping us see what happens inside the brain when someone we love dies. Researchers now understand that grief is not only sadness—it is also a form of learning. The brain must slowly update its internal map of the world after the loss of someone who once played a central role in our daily lives.

The Brain’s Map of Love

When we love someone, the brain creates an internal representation of that person. We learn their voice, their habits, and the rhythm of their presence in our lives. Over time they become part of our brain’s prediction system. The brain expects them to answer the phone, walk through the door, or sit beside us at dinner.

When that person dies, the brain’s predictions do not immediately update. Your heart may know the person is gone, but the brain still expects them. This gap between expectation and reality is one of the reasons grief hurts so deeply. Each time the

brain expects the person and discovers they are not there, it must adjust again.

The GPS Metaphor

A helpful way to understand grief is through the metaphor of a GPS system. Imagine you have driven the same road home for years. One day the city removes a bridge along that route, but your GPS has not received the update. It keeps guiding you toward the missing road.

Grief can feel exactly like that. Your mind reaches for the person who once belonged in your life. You start to call them. You look for them in a crowd. You think of something you want to tell them. Each time your brain discovers the road is gone, it recalculates. Over time, the map slowly adjusts.

Yearning Is Part of Attachment

One of the most powerful emotions in grief is yearning—the intense longing to see the person again. Neuroscience has discovered that this longing has a biological basis. Brain imaging studies show that when grieving people look at photographs of their loved one, areas of the brain connected to motivation and reward become active.

This system is closely tied to dopamine, the chemical that drives the brain to pursue what matters most to us. In grief, the brain continues signaling that the attachment figure is important. The longing that follows is not weakness or obsession. It is evidence of how deeply human connection is wired into our biology.

Protest and Despair

Psychologists studying attachment have long observed two common reactions when a loved one disappears: protest and despair. Protest includes searching behaviors—calling their name, replaying memories, or scanning crowds for their face. Despair involves exhaustion, withdrawal, and the painful realization that life has changed.

Most grieving people move back and forth between these states. At times the mind searches urgently for the person. At other times the body collapses into fatigue. These swings are not signs of weakness. They are part of the brain's attempt to adapt to a new reality.

The Body on Grief

Grief is not only emotional; it is physical. Many people experience tightness in the chest, fatigue, headaches, digestive changes, or disrupted sleep. This occurs because close relationships help regulate our nervous system. A familiar voice, a hug, or the presence of someone we trust can calm stress responses in the body.

When that person dies, the nervous system must learn how to stabilize itself again. This adjustment takes time. It explains why grief can feel physically exhausting even when a person has done nothing all day.

Why Community Matters

Across cultures and centuries, human communities have gathered around the grieving. Shared meals, funerals, storytelling, and memorial rituals allow people to mourn together. Modern science confirms the wisdom of these traditions. Social connection helps calm the nervous system and restore a sense of safety.

Storytelling is especially powerful. Each time we tell stories about the person who died, the brain revisits the bond while gradually integrating the reality of the loss. Repeating stories is not being stuck in grief. It is one of the ways the brain learns.



Holding Love and Loss Together

Another misunderstanding about grief is that it should contain only sadness. In reality grief often includes many emotions—sorrow, gratitude, pride, and even moments of warmth when remembering a shared life. These emotions do not erase grief. They allow love and loss to exist together.

Over time the relationship with the person who died changes form. They are no longer physically present, but their influence continues in memories, values, and the way we live our lives.

Healing Takes Time

The science of grief offers a compassionate conclusion. Healing does not mean forgetting the person who died. Instead it means learning how to carry the bond forward in a different way.

The brain cannot rewrite years of attachment overnight. With time, support, and patience, the internal map slowly adjusts. The love that once connected two lives does not disappear—it becomes part of the pathways that shape who we are.

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You Can Do This!

A young oak once complained to the old oak beside it. “The winds are too strong,” the young tree said. “Every storm bends my branches. I fear I will never grow tall.”

The old oak replied, “When I was young, the storms bent me too. But each wind pushed my roots deeper into the earth.”

Years later travelers rested beneath the shade of the young oak. One day it asked the old tree, “When did the storms finally stop?”

The old oak answered, “They never stopped. But my roots learned how to hold.”

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Sources: O'Connor, Mary-Frances. *The Grieving Brain: The Surprising Science of How We Learn from Love and Loss*. HarperOne, 2022. Huberman, Andrew & O'Connor, Mary-Frances. *Huberman Lab Podcast: The Science and Process of Healing from Grief*. van der Kolk, Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Viking, 2014. Bowlby, John. *Attachment and Loss*. Basic Books, 1969.

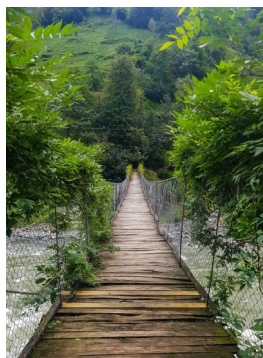
Grief Healing in Nature: Why Your Mind and Body Need “Vitamin N”

When grief feels overwhelming, one of the simplest healing tools may be waiting right outside your door.

Think of it as “Vitamin N” — the Nature Vitamin. Mother Nature offers it freely in blue skies, green leaves, warm sunlight, and flowing water. Time outdoors can calm the nervous system, soothe a grieving heart, and gently restore the spirit.

Greening Your Grief

Even brief time in nature can reduce stress and improve emotional well-being. The Mayo Clinic encourages people to carve out regular “green time,” noting that natural environments can lower stress hormones, improve mood, and strengthen resilience.



For someone grieving, these small shifts matter. A short walk, sitting beside water, or simply feeling sunlight on your face can help the body begin to relax when emotions feel heavy.

Memories in the Outdoors

Nature often awakens memories. The scent of trees, the sound of waves, or the warmth of summer air may remind you of moments shared with someone you love.

These memories may feel bittersweet — and that is part of grief. Allow yourself to smile, laugh, or cry. Remember the simple moments: family picnics, gardening together, long walks, or watching a sunset.

Returning to places that hold good memories can help us mourn while also honoring the love that was there.

Hope in Every Season

Lady Bird Johnson once said, “Where flowers bloom, so does hope.” Nature reminds us that life moves in seasons. The sun rises. The sun sets. Spring follows winter.

Even in grief, renewal slowly returns. Sometimes hope appears quietly — in a garden, the companionship of a pet, or a peaceful moment outdoors.

Your Brain Loves Nature

Research shows that time in natural environments can calm the brain’s stress response, reduce rumination, and support emotional healing after loss.

To Ponder

- What place in nature brings you the most peace or reminds you of someone you love?
- What small way could you take in a little more “Vitamin N” this week?

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Thursday Daytime Meetings

Please note Cabin Coffee has changed their closing time to 2:00 PM, which began March 16.

Daytime: 12:00–1:30 PM — Cabin Coffee, 2040 Kimball Ave., Waterloo

Evenings: 5:00–6:30 p.m. — Locke at Tower Park, 4140 Kimball Ave., Waterloo

Let us help you heal your grief and end your suffering, so you can live again.

A Community Gift from Locke Funeral Services

JOIN US every week!

2026 Continuous Care Support Groups



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Grief Support Daytime Meetings

TIME: 12:00—1:30 p.m.

LOCATION:

Cabin Coffee,
2040 Kimball, Waterloo

Grief Support Evening Meetings

TIME: 5:00-6:30 p.m.

LOCATION:

Locke at Tower Park,
4140 Kimball, Waterloo

Weekly Thursday Dates:

April 2, 9, 16, 23, 30

May 7, 14, 21, 28

June 4, 11, 18, 25

Suicide Grief Support Meetings

TIME: 5:00-6:30 p.m.

LOCATION:

Locke at Tower Park,
4140 Kimball, Waterloo

Biweekly Wednesday Dates:

April 1, 15

May 6, 20

June 3, 17

*Please feel free to bring a friend. All groups are free & open to the public!
Call with questions 319-233-6138.*

WEATHER ALERT: If schools are closed due to weather, the meeting is canceled.

Want to be on our mailing list? Give us a call, to join our quarterly newsletter list.

Continuous Care
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