

UBC STUDENT

# GRIEF GUIDE





# What is grief?

Grief is a natural emotional response to any form of loss. Grief is a universal experience, but it can be difficult to identify.

Grief is an expected response after the death of a loved one including a pet and also arises from other significant losses. Grief can be ongoing for caregivers of people with chronic or serious illness. Other experiences of loss such as the end of a relationship, loss of a job or home, setbacks in academics or career, environmental and social events, or a new diagnosis of a serious illness for you or a loved one are all examples of events that often lead to grieving.



# How is grief experienced?

There is no “right way” to grieve and there is great variability in how we experience grief. A common misperception about grief is that we go through certain predictable stages of grief in a specific order and then return to life as it was. This is very rarely the case. Grief is far more like a pendulum. Moments of sorrow alternate with moments of feeling more like yourself. These swings in emotion may vary in speed within the same person from day to day.

Grief can profoundly impact all aspects of life and can persist for longer than we may expect. Grief can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness, so it helps to identify grief, to have strategies to support yourself when you experience grief and be able to support people around you when they face grief.





## What if someone close to you is grieving?

It's normal to feel unsure about what to do or say when someone has experienced a loss and is grieving. Too often, this uncertainty leads people to do nothing or even to avoid the person who is grieving. There are many things you can do to offer support. Most strategies are simple and don't take much time yet can be very meaningful to someone experiencing grief. As you think about what you can offer, you will likely consider the nature of your relationship with the person who is grieving and decide what feels most appropriate for you and for the person you are supporting.

LET THEM KNOW THAT YOU ARE THERE  
AND OFFER PRACTICAL HELP

### HERE ARE A FEW STRATEGIES AND TIPS TO HELP YOU OFFER MEANINGFUL SUPPORT:

- Offer your lecture notes
- Send an email or handwritten note to say that you are thinking about them
- Be willing to sit with someone, even in silence
- Drop off nutritious snacks or a meal

Although open-ended offers to “call me anytime” or “let me know if you need anything” let the person grieving know you are there to support them, specific suggestions can make it easier for them to accept help. For example, you might suggest something specific like “I’m going to go for a walk this afternoon, would you like to join me?” It’s important to acknowledge the person is grieving, but don’t be afraid to suggest something that might be fun to do.



# Give the grieving person time

Grief is a long process we each experience in our own way.

1

## Patience

Be patient. Losses and acute grief may fade, but they do not “go away.”

2

## Coexistence of Emotions

When someone who has been grieving is laughing or enjoying a moment, know they may feel guilty at the same time.

3

## Effort

Sympathy often fades quickly, but grief lingers. Make a note in your calendar to check in regularly in the coming weeks and months. Grief often wells up on important dates such as birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays. Add these important dates to your calendar as these are good times to check in when someone you know is experiencing grief or loss.

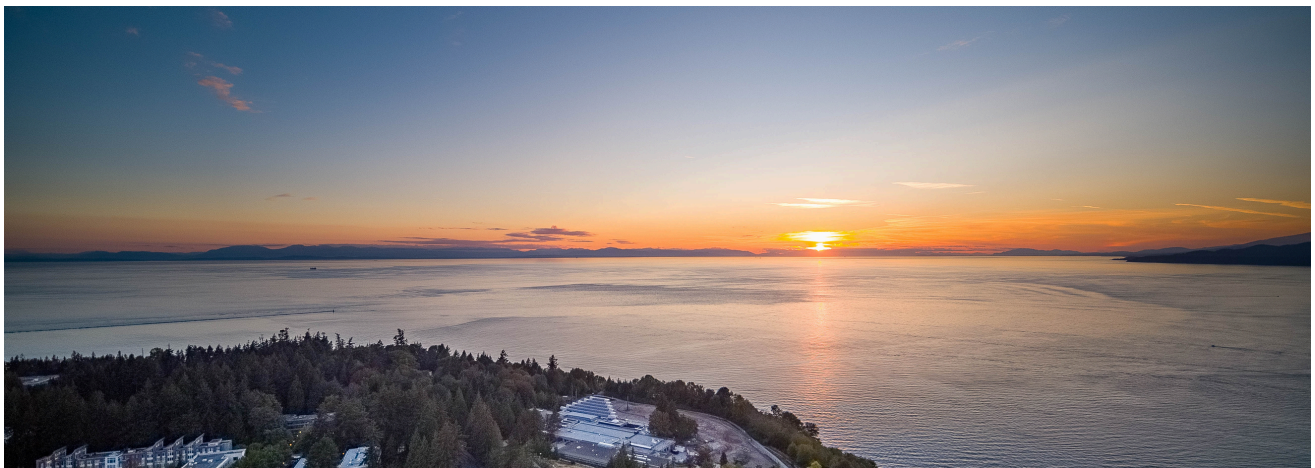
Avoid suggesting that a return to school, work, or other activities means a person has completed their grieving. Instead, acknowledge that you're happy to see them and offer direct support.



# Recognize that people grieve in different ways

We all grieve differently. Some of us express grief openly and some of us withdraw. Practices surrounding death, mourning, and bereavement differ and often have strong, important cultural, ethnic, religious, and/or spiritual traditions. Traditions, practices, and rituals inform decisions such as time from death to burial, acceptability of cremation, how family and community gather before or after burial, and the importance of ceremonies connected with funerals and/or the anniversary of a death. Some traditions include ceremonial practices with physical markers for the bereaved, such as hair cutting or tattooing. If you are unsure about specific practices as you support a friend or colleague, express interest and ask if they are willing to talk with you about their personal, family, and cultural traditions.

When a member of our campus community dies, the university's response is guided by the family's wishes. The university aims to honour the preferences of those directly affected, so you can expect some variation in how a death is acknowledged, for example, whether campus flags are flown at half-mast.





# Small acts make a difference



It can be difficult to know how to offer support or to find the right words. Don't let your uncertainty stop you from offering support to someone who is with serious illness or experiencing grief. Even if you sound awkward, people will appreciate your presence and empathy more than inaction or avoidance.

The most important thing is to listen rather than talk and to show that you are there. Sometimes it's more comfortable to offer to DO something, so here are a few ideas to get you started:

## WHAT CAN I DO?

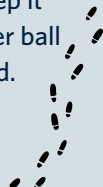
Host a study session to help the person catch up on missed class time



Be curious and open to learning about cultural practices surrounding grief and loss



Invite the person to join you to exercise. Keep it simple - go for a walk, roll, hike, kick a soccer ball around, or find a yoga or spin class to attend.



Invite the person to join you for a meal or a coffee



Invite the person to join you to attend a BARK session to visit with a therapy dog



If the person is further away, send a quick check in by text or send a letter, postcard, or small care package to let the person know you're thinking about them



# Express empathy



It's normal to feel awkward and at a loss for words when someone is grieving. However, if we try to imagine their feeling of grief then we will speak genuine words of support, even if phrased a little awkwardly. We will also be more likely to avoid empty sayings like 'time heals all wounds', 'everything happens for a reason', or 'life goes on'. These well-meaning platitudes can come across as uncaring to someone who is grieving. It's ok to simply acknowledge their grief and say you're at a loss for words.

Remain open to genuine conversation. Don't be afraid to open a wound or to say the name of the person who died. Unless the person asks, try to avoid giving advice or focusing on your own experiences of loss.

Ultimately, it's important that what you say feels true to who you are, so you might not say exactly what's suggested here, but these examples may give you some ideas about what to avoid and some things to try.

## WHAT CAN I SAY?

Avoid saying....	Instead try...
"If there's anything you need, just let me know."	"I'm going shopping, is there anything I can get you?" "I would happily cook you a meal, what are some of your favourite foods?"
"Are you feeling better now? Are you ok?"	"How are you doing today?" "How are you managing?"
"Give me a call!"	"If it's ok with you, I'll call you on Friday to check in"
"Everything happens for a reason"	'This is such a difficult loss. I'm so sorry.' 'I don't have the right words to offer, but I'm here for you.'
"I know just how you feel..."	"I cannot imagine how you feel. Do you have time for a coffee and a chat?"





# Personal Wellbeing

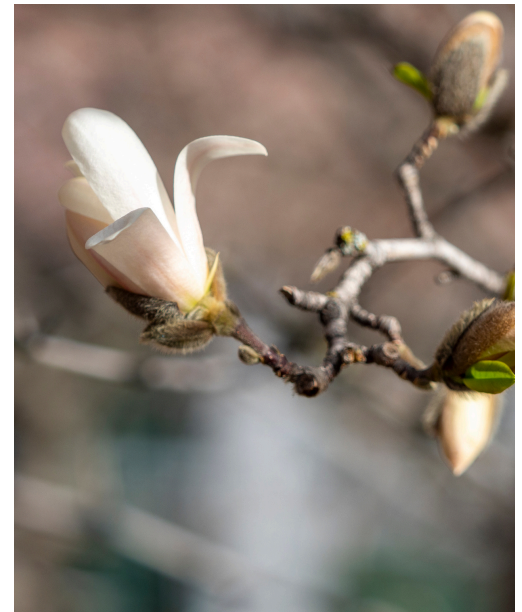
To offer sustained care for others requires that you also care yourself. It is ok to set clear boundaries for yourself and to seek out others who can join you in offering support. As you support others in their grief, it is important to recognize your own experience of grief and loss. Sometimes our current or past experiences of grief resurface in the context of supporting someone else. It is important to recognize your own need for support and take care not to lean on a person newly experiencing grief to help you feel better. You will be able to offer steady, meaningful support for others only if you also prioritize your own sleep, nutrition, exercise, and overall wellbeing.

# WHAT IF YOU ARE GRIEVING?

## GIVE YOURSELF PERMISSION TO GRIEVE

Acknowledge that grief is normal and healthy. Be kind to yourself and accept that it will take time to feel more like yourself. Grieving takes up a lot of energy and it is hard work, which takes a toll on your mind and body.

It is normal to worry about falling behind with classes, assignments, and exams. There are supports available to help you navigate your school work so you can truly focus on your health and wellbeing.



## GIVE YOURSELF THE SAME KINDNESS YOU WOULD OFFER TO OTHERS.

- recognize that your personal wellbeing is a priority
- prioritize rest, good nutrition, and exercise
- try to set aside feelings of guilt when seemingly ordinary tasks seem overwhelming
- talk with a friend, family member, elder or trusted advisor





# What if YOU are grieving?

## DECIDE IF YOU ARE COMFORTABLE TO TALK ABOUT YOUR LOSS

Do you like it when others ask how you are or is the loss still too painful to talk about? It's ok to tell others around you how you feel about this. It will give them the chance to recognize and support your needs. If you change your mind, that's ok and you can let people know your preferences as they change over time and even within a conversation. You might say "I really appreciate the chance to talk about [person's name] and it's still a lot to process so I need to take a break and talk about something else for a while."

People often say they feel alone in their grief. It really does help to share how you're feeling. You are not alone. Think broadly about the people in your life you could talk with - maybe a friend from home, a trusted elder or advisor, a parent or sibling, aunt, uncle, or cousin, or roommate. Even if it's been a while since you've talked, try reaching out to a few people. You might have to try a few times to find the right person. As a UBC student, you also have professional support available to you.

# Focus on Your Basic Needs and Self-Care

## UBC Okanagan Campus

This is not a comprehensive list and there's no expectation for you to do all these things! Here are a few ideas to help you when you're not quite sure where to start or what to do...

1

### Connect

Invite someone to join you for a cup of tea or a short walk or attend a BARK session

2

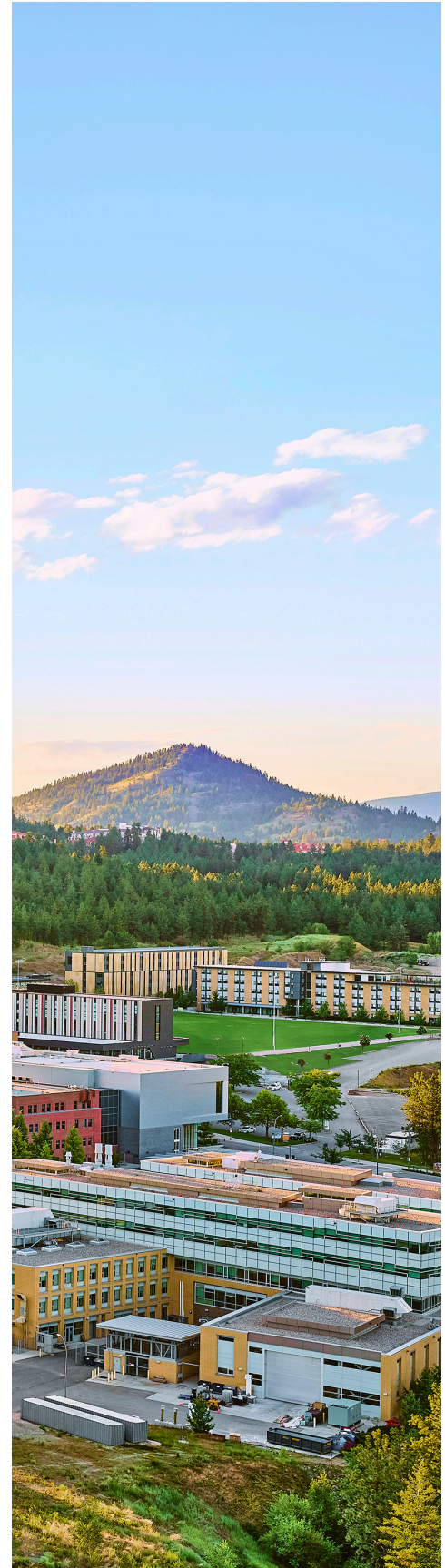
### Reflect

There are a number of quiet spaces on campus that are ideal for quiet reflection (e.g., the Spiritual and Multifaith Space - UNC 316), outdoor spaces, and nearby nature trails

3

### Take Care of Your Physical Health

- Ensure you are eating, exercising, and sleeping
- If someone offers a meal, accept or visit Picnic for an easy, low barrier meal
- Go for a walk or attend an exercise class at the Rec Centre
- Prioritize sleep and rest. If you're having trouble sleeping, some resources may help





# Focus on Your Basic Needs and Self-Care

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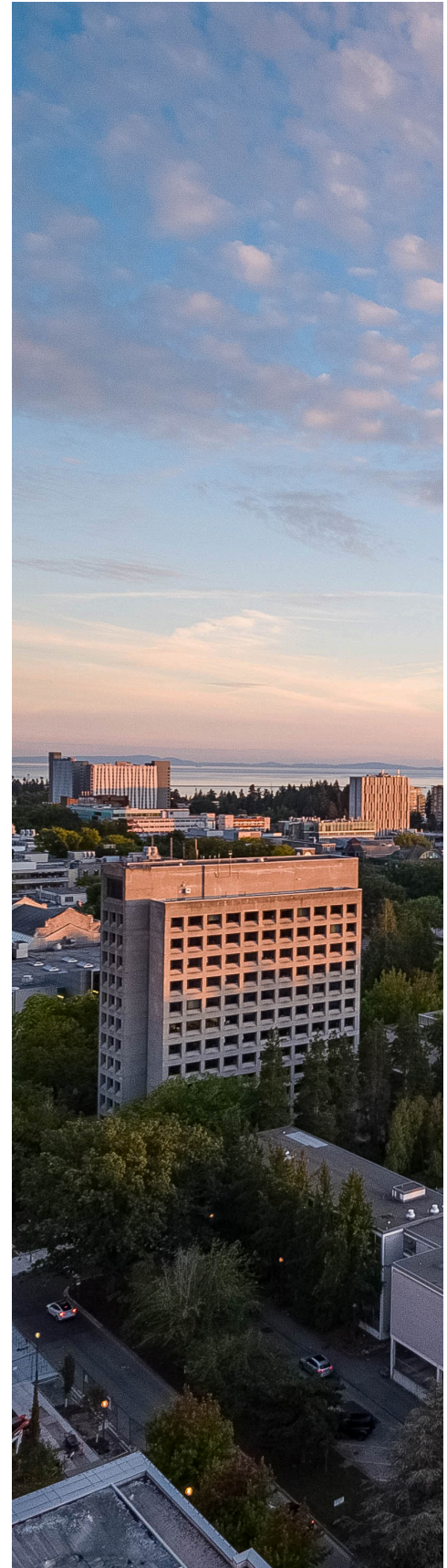
### Reflect

There are a number of quiet spaces on campus that are ideal for quiet reflection (e.g., Multifaith Prayer Rooms), outdoor spaces, and nearby nature trails

3

### Take Care of Your Physical Health

- Ensure you are eating, exercising, and sleeping
- If someone offers a meal, accept or check out other campus and community resources for an easy, low barrier meal
- Go for a walk or attend an exercise class at the Rec Centre
- Prioritize sleep and rest. If you're having trouble sleeping, some resources may help





# It's ok to ask for help

Sometimes it's hard to know exactly what you need. When you do identify something that would help, try asking. Do you need a chat? Someone to go for a walk with you? To get caught up on a class you missed? An easy meal? Tell a friend or classmate - they will likely appreciate knowing how they can support you because people often aren't sure about how best to offer support.

Grief and loss can be overwhelming. As a student at UBC, you don't have to navigate this by yourself. There are a variety of supports available to you. These supports won't take away your grief, but you may find you are able to manage your essential needs when other concerns are removed, even temporarily. For example, your academic or program advisor can help you to navigate university systems, communicate with your professors on your behalf, or may help you to identify options you haven't considered or don't know about.

Some support services provide direct assistance or someone to talk to, while others may simply help to direct you to the right place for support.



## WOULD YOU LIKE SOME SUPPORT?

### UBC Okanagan Resources

#### For support with academics and navigating university systems

Academic Advisor or Program Director or Associate Dean	An academic advisor, director of your academic program, or associate dean in your faculty can help you identify options available and with your permission, may be able to communicate with your instructors to request absences or changes to assignment or exam due dates.
Academic Concessions Request	Academic accommodations can be given for compassionate reasons. You may be eligible for flexibility with academic deadlines or modifications in your course registrations. More information is available here: <a href="https://students.ubc.ca/enrolment/academic-learning-resources/academic-concessions">https://students.ubc.ca/enrolment/academic-learning-resources/academic-concessions</a>
UBCO Indigenous Programs and Services UNC 210	Indigenous Programs and Services offers support with navigation of university processes, policies, and academics: <a href="https://students.ok.ubc.ca/indigenous-students/">https://students.ok.ubc.ca/indigenous-students/</a>
Ombuds Office	This office offers confidential help with how to navigate university processes or policies. The ombuds office can talk with you about options within the university, who and how to communicate your needs if you encounter barriers: <a href="https://ombudsoffice.ubc.ca/">https://ombudsoffice.ubc.ca/</a>

#### For personal support

UBCO Counseling Centre (Mon-Fri) UNC 337	Free, confidential counseling for students (Monday-Friday). Some walk-in services available. Call to Book (250) 807-9270. Ask about availability of grief group sessions. <a href="https://students.ok.ubc.ca/counselling">https://students.ok.ubc.ca/counselling</a>
Indigenous Programs and Services UBCO UNC 210	Indigenous Programs and Services offers support and resources on campus and in the community: <a href="https://students.ok.ubc.ca/indigenous-students/">https://students.ok.ubc.ca/indigenous-students/</a>
Spiritual and Multifaith Services UNC 316	UBCO has chaplains from multiple faith traditions and maintains contact with community-based organizations. To contact directly, email: <a href="mailto:faith.spirituality@ubc.ca">faith.spirituality@ubc.ca</a>
UBCO Student Services	UBCO offers online resources and in-person support for all students. For information about resources available to students, please visit: <a href="https://students.ok.ubc.ca/health-wellness/">https://students.ok.ubc.ca/health-wellness/</a>
UBCO Students' Union Services UNC 133	UBCO offers resources and support for students through the Students' Union that includes health and dental, legal aid, advocacy, Indigenous Peoples Collective, Pride Resource Centre, confidential peer support Women's Resource Centre, counseling, and other supports. For more information, please visit: <a href="https://www.suo.ca/services/">https://www.suo.ca/services/</a>
Emergency Funding	If you have unexpected expenses related to travel home or other unexpected costs, visit: <a href="https://students.ok.ubc.ca/courses-money-enrolment/finances/financial-support/emergency-funding/">https://students.ok.ubc.ca/courses-money-enrolment/finances/financial-support/emergency-funding/</a> OR email: <a href="mailto:awards.ubco@ubc.ca">awards.ubco@ubc.ca</a>

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UBCV Indigenous Academic Resources	The First Nations House of Learning shares Indigenous Academic Services that offers support with navigation of university processes, policies, and academics: <a href="https://fnhl.ubc.ca/students/student-resources/academic-resources/">https://fnhl.ubc.ca/students/student-resources/academic-resources/</a>
Ombuds Office	This office offers confidential help with how to navigate university processes or policies. The ombuds office can talk with you about options within the university, who and how to communicate your needs if you encounter barriers: <a href="https://ombudsoffice.ubc.ca/">https://ombudsoffice.ubc.ca/</a>

#### For personal support

UBCV Counseling Clinics (Mon-Fri) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brock Hall, Room 1040 (1874 East Mall)</li> <li>Counselling Services Annex (1930 East Mall)</li> </ul>	Free, confidential counseling for students (Monday-Friday). Some walk-in services available. Call to Book 604 822 3811 <a href="https://students.ubc.ca/health/counselling-services/">https://students.ubc.ca/health/counselling-services/</a>
Counsellors in Residence:	<a href="https://vancouver.housing.ubc.ca/counsellor-in-residence/">https://vancouver.housing.ubc.ca/counsellor-in-residence/</a>
Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing program	Indigenous Programs and Services offers support and resources on campus and in the community: <a href="https://students.ubc.ca/health/counselling-services/indigenous-mental-health-wellbeing-program/">https://students.ubc.ca/health/counselling-services/indigenous-mental-health-wellbeing-program/</a>
Spiritual and Multifaith Services	UBCV has chaplains from multiple faith traditions, multifaith prayer rooms, and student-run organizations. <a href="https://students.ubc.ca/campus-life/religion-spirituality/">https://students.ubc.ca/campus-life/religion-spirituality/</a>
UBCV Student Health Service	UBCV offers online resources and in-person support for all students. For information about resources available to students, please visit: <a href="https://students.ubc.ca/health/student-health-service/">https://students.ubc.ca/health/student-health-service/</a>
Wellness Centre <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UBC Life Building, Room 1400 (6138 Student Union Boulevard)</li> </ul>	[describe Wellness Centre] For more information, please visit: <a href="https://students.ubc.ca/health/wellness-centre/">https://students.ubc.ca/health/wellness-centre/</a>
Emergency Funding	If you have unexpected costs, visit: <a href="https://students.ubc.ca/finances/financial-support-options/emergency-funding/">https://students.ubc.ca/finances/financial-support-options/emergency-funding/</a>



## Help is Available 24 Hours a Day, 7 Days a Week

Community resources are very broad and cover a range of offerings. Consider resources within your personal community, the university, and the greater Okanagan area, and online supports.

UBCV: <https://students.ubc.ca/health/>

UBCO: <https://students.ok.ubc.ca/health-wellness/>

For additional resources, please also visit:

Here2Talk	Free, immediate, and available to BC university students. Toll Free (877) 857-3397   Canada-Wide (604) 642-5212
Hope for Wellness Helpline for Indigenous Peoples (24/7)	Call: 1-855-242-3310 or chat online: <a href="https://www.hopeforwellness.ca/">https://www.hopeforwellness.ca/</a>
Crisis Line (24/7)	Call or Text: 911
Suicide Crisis Helpline	Call or Text: 988

## For More Information About Grief...

There are many resources available about grief and grieving. Here are just a few to get you started...

Speaking Grief	A non-profit agency with resources about what grief is, impacts grief can have, and interviews about experiences of grief stemming from a wide variety of sources: <a href="https://speakinggrief.org/">https://speakinggrief.org/</a>
Canadian Grief Alliance	A coalition of leading health and grief-related and -adjacent organizations, as well as professionals, and members of the public from across Canada. The webpage provides information, support tools, stories, and guidance for people experiencing loss or supporting others through grief: <a href="https://aboutgrief.ca/">https://aboutgrief.ca/</a>
Community-Based Support Groups	Example: BC Cancer offers free counseling support for family members of people with cancer: <a href="http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/our-services/services/supportive-care/patient-family-counseling">http://www.bccancer.bc.ca/our-services/services/supportive-care/patient-family-counseling</a>
BC Centre for Palliative Care	Free resources and online discussions about grief: <a href="https://www.bc-cpc.ca/echo-project-new-home/">https://www.bc-cpc.ca/echo-project-new-home/</a>

# Acknowledgements

This guide is based on the work of the Compassionate University Project at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). In 2024, the UBC Wellbeing Strategic Initiative Fund provided support for semi-structured interviews of undergraduate and graduate students from across the UBCO campus to facilitate adapting the work from VUB for the UBC Okanagan campus. This guide for UBC Vancouver students is adapted from the UBC Okanagan version with campus-specific resources embedded. We are grateful to students, staff, faculty, and administrators who reviewed drafts of this document for their many thoughtful contributions.

## Feedback encouraged

We welcome your suggestions to improve or update the content or resources included in this document. Please [click](#) to completed a very brief, anonymous feedback form.

