
Wellbeing

Collective grief in the aftermath of Cyclone Gabrielle

For those impacted directly or indirectly by Cyclone Gabrielle, you may have noticed that your emotions are heightened right now – or that you don't even know what you are feeling. This is completely normal and understandable as we adjust to changing circumstances and different routines.

Many of us are grieving right now, and we may not have expected that. We might expect grief when we experience the passing of loved ones. But grief is inextricably linked with loss and many of us around Aotearoa are facing great loss right now in the wake of the cyclone, whether we have lost loved ones or not: the loss of routine and normalcy; the loss of home or possessions; and the loss of stability.

For some of us, we may be grieving for our plans that have been disrupted by the cyclone. We may be fearing for the health of our loved ones, or pre-emptively grieving for losses that may occur in the coming weeks and months. All this grief is valid, and you are not alone.

Over the past days or weeks, you may have found yourself forgetting, for small moments, about the loss that you have experienced. Maybe you woke up this morning and you had a few peaceful moments before remembering that it was not a normal day. Maybe, when you remembered, you felt that gut-wrenching realisation wash over you.

This is grief. In the same way that, when we lose a loved one, our daily routine eventually continues, so too are we forced to continue amongst this grief.

HERE ARE SOME TIPS TO HELP YOU MANAGE YOUR GRIEF OVER THE COMING DAYS AND WEEKS:

Acknowledge your feelings

- Take time in your day to sit with your feelings. Observe the emotions that you are carrying with you and label what it is you feel. What is most important here is that you regularly allow yourself to feel what you are feeling and, through doing so, you give it permission to pass.
- Realise that grief does not always present in the same way. Most models of grief share one thing in common – that no two grieving experiences are the same. Whatever emotions you experience – anger, denial, sadness, or fear – these are natural reactions to loss. These emotions may come and go and, importantly, there may be times where you feel peace or acceptance, too. It's OK to feel this way.
- Share your emotions. Write what you are feeling down or share it with someone close to you (if you feel comfortable to do so). Sharing these feelings relieves the burden on your shoulders and can also relieve the suffering of others by recognising that you both feel the same way.



We are all in this together

- Try to avoid ranking yourself on some sort of “hierarchy of grief” compared to others. The cyclone may not have affected us all equally, but we are all grieving in some way. Do your best not to discount your own, or others’, feelings.
- Show self-compassion and compassion to others. Be gentle with your feelings and try not to place high expectations of productivity on yourself. Everyone manifests their grief in different ways; try to be accepting and tolerant if you, or the people around you, are acting differently than you would under normal circumstances.
- In the same way that you should acknowledge your own feelings, acknowledge how other people are feeling. You do not need to “fix” everything or offer a silver lining (e.g., “At least we are still healthy!”). Sometimes the people around you simply need to feel seen and supported (e.g., “I know this is difficult, and it’s understandable you feel lost right now – I’ll call you back tomorrow to check in on how you are doing”).
- To look after yourself and those around you, it is important to focus your energy on being in the present. If meditation and mindfulness are not your thing, try simple grounding techniques when you find your mind racing: breathe deeply and focus on what you can see, hear, and feel in the moment. Find certainty in the realities of your “here and now” and focus on these certainties rather than the “what ifs”.
- Focus on what is in your control and let go of what is not. If it helps, make a list of what you can do to help the current situation (e.g., “I can cook for my neighbours, and donate my time to the clean-up efforts”) and gently nudge away any feelings that relate to circumstances out of your control right now (e.g., “Will the insurance company accept my claims?!”). You cannot control other people or “fix” the devastation caused by the cyclone, but you can do your bit to make it better.
- Find balance in the positives and negatives. Read up on positive stories of community spirit as often as you read the doomsday headlines. There is no guilt in feeling joy in times like these, so stock up on laughter and connection where you can. Coming together as a community is one of the most helpful things we can do in the aftermath of a disaster.

Minimise anticipatory grief

“Anticipatory grief” comes when we feel uncertainty about the future and imagine the worst that can happen.