Whenever we face loss, we experience grief. That is common and universal. Yet the responses we have as we grieve are unique and individual. Each of us responds differently to loss. Our reactions to grief can include physical symptoms, confused feelings, strange thoughts and angry reactions.

Grief is a stressful experience and stress can adversely affect health. Our physical response to grief can include such things as headaches, nausea, insomnia, tenseness, exhaustion, menstrual irregularities, loss of appetite, pains, and sensitivity to noise.

In many cases these physical responses will diminish as we begin to resolve grief. But, having your reactions checked by an understanding physician who understands that grief can affect health can provide peace-of-mind.

We experience all kinds of emotions in loss. Anger, for example, is a common and natural reaction to loss. Someone we love and care about has been taken from us. That loss may then create a deep sense of powerlessness and rage. We may be angry with God, or the universe, for this unfair act. We may be angry with the person who died for leaving us so miserable. And we may express that anger and rage, taking it out on others around us.

Another common reaction is guilt. We experience guilt in so many ways. Sometimes we feel guilty because we believe we may have contributed to or in some way caused the death. We are haunted by the “if only” option. “If only I had made him stop smoking.” “If only I forbade him to go to the party.”

Sometimes we feel guilty because we believe we are morally responsible – that God is punishing us for something we did.

Loss can also heighten our sense of vulnerability, creating anxiety. Sometimes, on the other hand, we may experience a sense of relief or emancipation. If someone has suffered long and we’ve experienced the long stresses of repeated hospitalizations, we may feel relieved that the ordeal is over and feel a sense that a burden is lifted. These feelings of relief are natural, and we need to accept that, though they may trouble us and cause guilt.

Grief is often full of any or all of these feelings. And like other stressful times in our lives, you may struggle with many contradictory and confused emotions simultaneously.

We also may have to cope with our own complicated thoughts and reactions as we respond to loss. For example, we may become preoccupied, confused, disoriented, or unable to concentrate. It is not unusual that our work can suffer, whether it is at home, at school, or in the office.
We may have a hard time believing the loss is real, constantly rehearsing the events in our mind. We may search for the meaning of life and death of the deceased.

All of these are normal, natural ways in which we respond to loss. Yet the total of all our reactions are uniquely individual. No person experiences grief in the exact same way as another. And even different losses may generate distinct responses. Each experience of grief is simply its own experience.