

Grief Revisited

How I'm coping with my mom's third cancer diagnosis

Story & Photo: Juliana White **Design:** Diana Meave



Growing up, adults would say the challenges I experience now will make me smarter, stronger and more prepared. So why doesn't it feel easier, now as an adult, to face the same situation that caused me grief when I was five? What even is grief?

The American Psychological Association defines grief as "the anguish experienced after significant loss, usually the death of a beloved person." This is the most common definition of the word, but many other factors also cause grief.

Grief is a complex and powerful emotion that, from experience, isn't simple to navigate. There is no linear start-and-finish timeline when healing from this emotion. I recently learned that the grief I first experienced as a child hits just as hard as an adult 16 years later.

In mid-January, during a routine bi-annual MRI checkup, my mom's doctors discovered a small area of tissue growth. Results I always hoped and wished would never appear again. My mom is a survivor of stage three brain cancer and up to that point was 11 years cancer free. Seeing new activity was not to be taken lightly. But before her doctors could label the tissue as benign or active, they needed to run a few more tests on her MRI scans. Meaning we wouldn't have any results until the end of the month.

Those two weeks of waiting are a blur in my memory, only clearing up the day before the appointment. I found myself sitting across from my parents in a restaurant, putting on a forced smile and making the same wish I've made every year since I was 5. As I blew out my 21st birthday candles, I wished for my mom to be cancer free.

Eventually, the anxiously awaited appointment arrived. Sitting in my room, staring up at the ceiling, waiting for

updates I mentally prepared for the worst outcome. Suddenly, my phone screen lit up, loudly buzzing on my desk. Hesitating for just a moment, I took a deep breath and answered. My heart sank when she greeted me and asked about my day. I already knew by the tension in her voice that her appointment didn't go well. Everything around me went silent as she said three dreaded words.

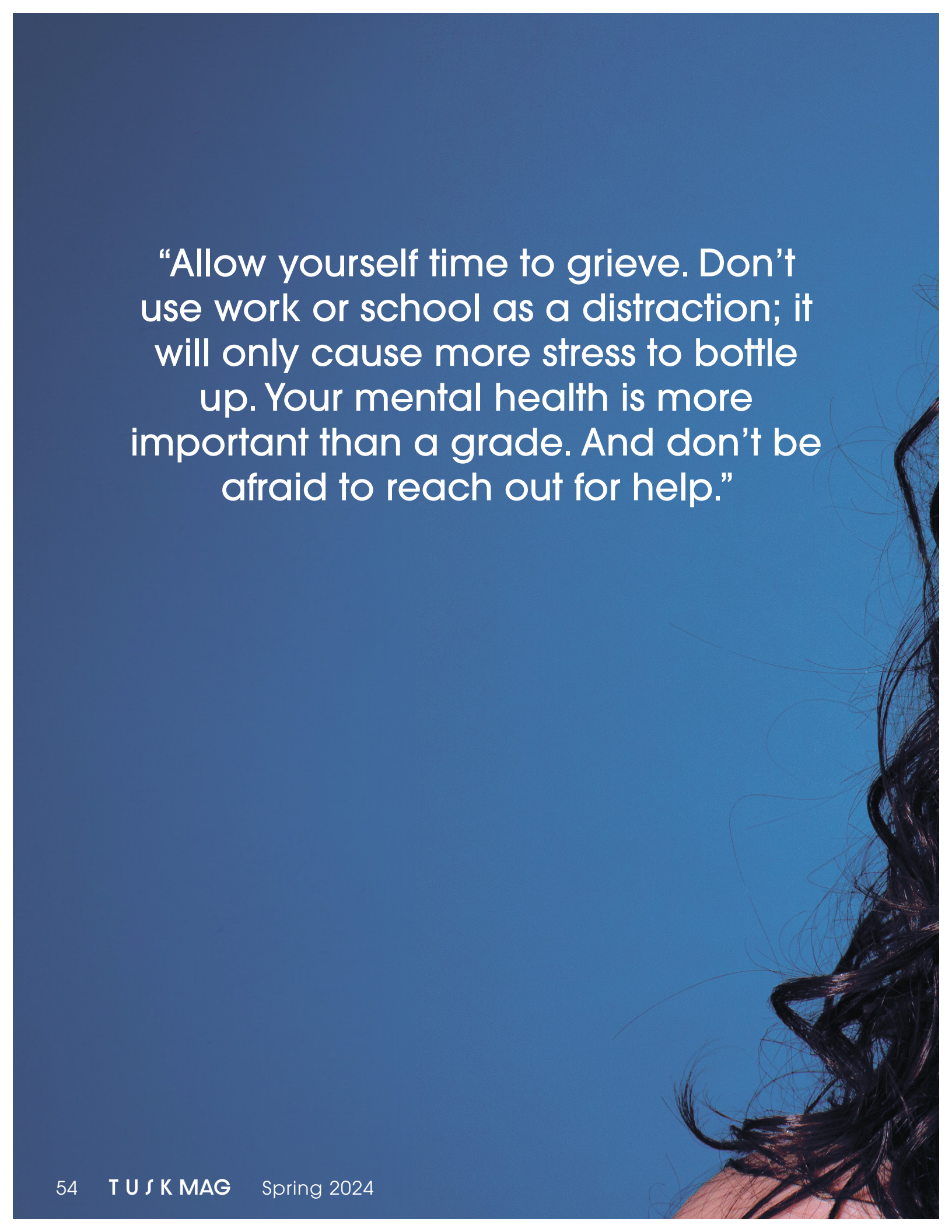
Active cancer cells.

At that moment, I felt like I was 5 years old again, peeking through my covers and watching multiple firefighters walk down the hall into my parent's room. It was the day my mom had a grand-mal seizure. The day we found out she had cancer. My first time experiencing agonizing grief.

As the call ended, I just sat there numb, head spinning, attempting to process the new information. Grief is uncomfortable and exhausting, both mentally and physically. Your life suddenly pauses while the rest of the world continues moving like normal. I just felt lost.

As the numbness passed, I started feeling three out of the five stages of grief. The stages, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, do not occur in any particular order and are experienced differently by everyone.

For me, denial was the first to take over. How can her cancer be back? It has been 16 years since the first diagnosis and 11 years since her second. That was supposed to be all. One final round of chemotherapy and radiation. She just beat it 11 years ago during her last round of chemotherapy and radiation. It wasn't supposed to come back. It shouldn't be back. Then anger set in.



“Allow yourself time to grieve. Don’t use work or school as a distraction; it will only cause more stress to bottle up. Your mental health is more important than a grade. And don’t be afraid to reach out for help.”





Why is her cancer back? I don't want to feel this way again. This is an awful, shitty, cruel birthday present that I wish came with a return receipt.

And finally, I felt myself spiraling straight into the depression stage. I was helpless. I knew I couldn't change the results. I could only accept the news and move on with life. But moving on isn't a simple flip of a switch. The hardest part isn't hearing the news, it's picking yourself back up and working on returning to your normal routines.

For any reader experiencing grief, I want you to remember to allow yourself time to grieve. Don't use work or school as a distraction, it will only cause more stress to bottle up. Your mental health is more important than a grade. And don't be afraid to reach out for help. There will always be someone who will listen to your problems and support you in the best way possible.

One of the best resources to utilize is therapy. I talked to Melissa Paramo, a licensed marriage and family therapist, to understand the experience of grief and its healing process better.

"What I usually do with clients is that I explain to them the stages of grief and it's not a structured set of stages that you're going to absolutely go in," Paramo said.

There is no set time range for when you will experience these or how intensely they may be felt.

A key to dealing with grief is not just accepting that you don't feel good, but also being okay with not feeling good, Paramo said.

I personally struggle with this step of the grieving process. When you stop guarding your emotions and let yourself process the situation, you feel vulnerable. While it feels safer behind the walls you build, it's not healthy.

"Taking some time off is really, really essential. That's why companies usually have three days of bereavement," Paramo said.

Going back to work or school too quickly can end up triggering more emotions. You may feel angry seeing those around you living like normal when you just experienced something so terrible. Stress from work and school, on top of dealing with grief, drains you mentally, which isn't healthy. Always set time aside for yourself to process the grief.

Another aspect when healing from grief is utilizing different tools. Paramo suggests writing letters to yourself or the person you are grieving over. She also recommends therapy and surrounding yourself with other people who can relate to and validate your feelings. Finding support can come from books, podcasts or support groups. Social media is also a good tool, as the world is so interconnected that it's easier than ever to find support groups that align with your specific needs.

Grief is intense and difficult to accept. While it may not be the most joyful period of time in your life, don't avoid it for that reason. Take time for yourself and implement the tools and steps needed to heal.