



# Balance In Grief B.I.G. Tip Sheet



**Grief Coach**  
*Kat Farace*

## Riding the Waves of Grief: Understanding Triggers & Setbacks

It had only been 20 years since the devastating reality that forever changed my life. I was very close to my mom, and I can still recall so many wonderful memories of the time we spent together—singing purposely off-key to songs on the car radio, eating lunch at our favorite little spot, Taco Paco, and then sitting in the center of Eastland Mall sharing an Orange Julius, snacking on slices of Hickory Farms beef stick, and people-watching.

My mom and I never had the typical rough teenage years filled with meaningless arguments. We got along beautifully. I respected her, and with her, I always felt safe. My parents adopted me when I was just three months old and gave me a loving, unconditional home to grow up in. My relationship with my mom was especially close because my pre-teen and teenage years were filled with tragedy—the loss of her sister, then her mother, and eventually her own cancer diagnosis. Our grief, though never spoken about openly, quietly bound us together. We had a silent understanding: life is fleeting, and every day is a gift.

Thirteen years after my mom passed away, I was walking through the mall running errands. By then, I had been married for over a decade and was raising three children. My life was full and busy. I missed my mom deeply, of course, and often longed for her support as I raised my own kids, but I believed I had moved on. The tears had long since stopped, and I told myself I had made peace with her loss—until that day.

With a few packages in my hand, I was heading to my next stop when I noticed a woman, about my age, walking alongside someone who was clearly her mother. I smiled politely as we passed each other, but in the very next moment, I stopped in my tracks. I couldn't breathe. Tears streamed down my face, and the world began to spin. I couldn't even remember where I was going. I hurried to my car, tossed my packages into the back seat, climbed inside, and sobbed.

What I didn't realize then was that I was having a STUG reaction—Sudden Temporary Upsurge of Grief. It blindsided me. In that moment, I was struck by the heartbreaking truth: I would never again have the chance to be a thirty-something woman walking through the mall with my mom.

It would be many years before I learned about the triggers, waves, and setbacks of grief. Back then, grief education and support were almost nonexistent. Hospice programs were only beginning to emerge on the East Coast. There were no grief support groups, no books that I knew of, and certainly no internet. Talking about death and grief was considered morbid—something to be avoided at all costs. For the bereaved, there was no real place to turn.

That's why grief education is so important. We need to be open, to share information, and to talk honestly with those we love. I applaud you for taking steps toward self-care and grief awareness, whether for yourself or someone you care about. Please share this knowledge, and remember that while the waves of grief are painful, they are also completely *normal*. Understanding that what you're experiencing is normal can take away the fear that you're "losing your mind" or that something is wrong with you. The truth is, you are grieving.

Grief is no small thing—it can hit unexpectedly, with overwhelming force. But knowing what is happening gives you the power to slow the momentum and intensity of those STUG moments, offering yourself space, time, and grace to move through the emotions.

When we grieve, we often feel at our weakest. But the truth is, in those moments, you are stronger than you have ever been.

## 1. What Are STUG Reactions?

**STUG** stands for **Surprise Trigger Urge Grief**—that sudden flood of emotion when something unexpectedly reminds you of your loss. It’s normal, not a setback—just part of grief’s unpredictable rhythm.

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## 2. Understanding Triggers, Waves & Setbacks

- **Grief Waves:** Emotions can wash over us in bursts—intense, powerful, often unexpected floods of emotions. Then rise—then recede. These “grief waves” are common in bereavement and begin to become less often and less intense over time.
- **Triggers:** These are everyday reminders—smells, songs, anniversaries, or seemingly unrelated moments—that can spark strong reactions of emotion.

**Setbacks:** Moments—or periods—when grief feels more overwhelming than usual. They’re not failures, but part of a non-linear healing journey. You may feel as if you are going backwards, but in truth it is just a normal reaction in grief.

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## 3. Techniques to Move Through STUG Moments & Emotional Waves

### A. Ground Yourself in the Present

- Acknowledge it. Label the moment: “This is a STUG reaction—an expected emotional wave.”

Use the **5–4–3–2–1 grounding technique**: Identify 5 things you see, 4 things you can touch, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, and 1 you taste. It helps ground you in now. This will interrupt the momentum of your grief reaction and ease the intensity.

### B. Compassionate Self-Talk

- Speak gently to yourself: “This feeling makes sense—it shows how deeply I cared.”

Remind yourself: “This wave will pass, like many before it.”

### C. Anchor in Safe Rituals & Routines

- Create a comforting ritual—light a candle, listen to a favorite song, or hold a soft object—to bring presence during waves.

Introduce a gentle daily rhythm (morning tea, evening journaling, meditate) to offer emotional steadiness amid unpredictability.

### D. Plan for Ripple Moments

- Build a “**STUG survival kit**”: include comforting songs, photos, grounding prompts, or contact names of trusted friends for moments of overwhelm.

Anticipate anniversaries or holidays; plan supportive rituals or self-care strategies in advance. Don’t let it sneak up on you... plan.

### E. Learn from Waves Over Time

- Reflect on past STUG moments: What sparked them? What helped ease them?

Tune into patterns—knowing triggers helps soften their impact over time.

## 4. Your STUG & Grief Wave Action Checklist

Step	Action
1	Name the experience: “This is a STUG wave—and it's okay.”
2	Ground yourself with senses: 5–4–3–2–1 technique.
3	Speak to yourself with compassion: “It’s natural to feel this.”
4	Use comforting rituals or routines as emotional anchors.
5	Prepare a “STUG kit” for unexpected emotional moments.
6	Reflect on triggers over time to build awareness and readiness.

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### Wrap-Up:

STUG reactions, grief waves, and setbacks aren’t signs of regression—they’re the tender language of love and loss. This tip sheet offers mindful, compassionate tools to help you meet those moments with presence, kindness, and growing strength.



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