

# **Grief, Bereavement, and Coping With Loss: Types of Grief Reactions**

## **Anticipatory Grief**

### **Anticipatory grief may occur when a death is expected.**

Anticipatory grief occurs when a death is expected, but can occur before it happens. It may be felt by the families of people who are dying and by the person dying. Anticipatory grief helps family members get emotionally ready for the loss. It can be a time to take care of unfinished business with the dying person, such as saying "I love you" or "I forgive you."

Like grief that occurs after the death of a loved one, anticipatory grief involves mental, emotional, cultural, and social responses. However, anticipatory grief is different from grief that occurs after the death. Symptoms of anticipatory grief include the following

- Depression
- Feeling a greater than usual concern for the dying person
- Imagining what the loved one's death will be like
- Getting ready emotionally for what will happen after the death

### **Anticipatory grief may help the family, but not the dying person.**

Anticipatory grief helps family members cope with what is to come. For the patient who is dying, anticipatory grief may be too much to handle and may cause him or her to withdraw from others.

### **Anticipatory grief does not always occur.**

Some researchers report that anticipatory grief is rare. Studies showed that periods of acceptance and recovery usually seen during grief are not common before the patient's actual death. The bereaved may feel that trying to accept the loss of a loved one before death occurs may make it seem that the dying patient has been abandoned. Also, grief felt before the death will not decrease the grief felt afterwards or make it last a shorter time.

## **Normal Grief**

### **Normal or common grief begins soon after a loss, and symptoms go away over time.**

During normal grief, the bereaved person moves toward accepting the loss and is able to continue normal day-to-day life even though it is hard to do. Common grief reactions include

- Emotional numbness, shock, disbelief, or denial. These often occur right after the death, especially if the death was not expected.
- Anxiety over being separated from the loved one. The bereaved may wish to bring the person back and become lost in thoughts of the deceased. Images of death may occur often in the person's everyday thoughts.
- Distress that leads to crying, sighing, having dreams, illusions, and hallucinations of the deceased, and looking for places or things that were shared with the deceased

- Anger
- Periods of sadness, loss of sleep, loss of appetite, extreme tiredness, guilt, and loss of interest in life. The bereaved's day-to-day life may be affected.

In normal grief, symptoms will occur less often and will feel less severe as time passes. Recovery does not happen in a set period of time. For most bereaved people having normal grief, symptoms lessen between 6 months and 2 years after the loss.

**Many bereaved people will have grief bursts or pangs.**

*Grief bursts* or *pangs* are short periods (20-30 minutes) of very intense distress. Sometimes these bursts are caused by reminders of the deceased person. At other times they seem to happen for no reason.

**Grief is sometimes described as a process that has stages.**

There are several theories about how the normal grief process works. Experts have described different types and numbers of stages that people go through as they cope with loss. At this time, there is not enough information to prove that one of these theories is more correct than the others.

Although many bereaved people have similar responses as they cope with their losses, there is no typical grief response. The grief process is personal.

**Complicated Grief**

There is no right or wrong way to grieve, but studies have shown that there are patterns of grief that are different from the most common. This has been called *complicated grief*. Complicated grief reactions that have been seen in studies include

- *Minimal grief reaction*: A grief pattern in which the person has no, or only a few, signs of distress or problems that occur with other types of grief.
- *Chronic grief*: A grief pattern in which the symptoms of common grief last for a much longer time than usual. These symptoms are a lot like ones that occur with major depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress.

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U.S. National Cancer Institute (NCI). (Modified 2013, March 6). *Grief, bereavement, and coping with loss*. Retrieved February 2, 2015, from <http://www.cancer.gov>

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## How to Deal With Grief

Grief is the normal response of sorrow, emotion, and confusion that comes from losing someone or something important to you. It is a natural part of life. Grief is a typical reaction to death, divorce, job loss, a move away from family and friends, or loss of good health due to illness.

### How does grief feel?

Just after a death or loss, you may feel empty and numb, as if you are in shock. You may notice physical changes such as trembling, nausea, trouble breathing, muscle weakness, dry mouth, or trouble sleeping and eating.

You may become angry—at a situation, a particular person, or just angry in general. Almost everyone in grief also experiences guilt. Guilt is often expressed as *I could have*, *I should have*, and *I wish I would have* statements.

People in grief may have strange dreams or nightmares, be absent-minded, withdraw socially, or lack the desire to return to work. While these feelings and behaviors are normal during grief, they will pass.

### How long does grief last?

Grief lasts as long as it takes you to accept and learn to live with your loss. For some people, grief lasts a few months. For others, grieving may take years.

The length of time spent grieving is different for each person. There are many reasons for the differences, including personality, health, coping style, culture, family background, and life experiences. The time spent grieving also depends on your relationship with the person lost and how prepared you were for the loss.

### How will I know when I'm done grieving?

Every person who experiences a death or other loss must complete a four-step grieving process:

1. Accept the loss.
2. Work through and feel the physical and emotional pain of grief.
3. Adjust to living in a world without the person or item lost.
4. Move on with life.

The grieving process is over only when a person completes the four steps.

## How does grief differ from depression?

Depression is more than a feeling of grief after losing someone or something you love. Clinical depression is a whole body disorder. It can take over the way you think and feel. Symptoms of depression include:

- A sad, anxious, or "empty" mood that won't go away
- Loss of interest in what you used to enjoy
- Low energy, fatigue, feeling "slowed down"
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Loss of appetite, weight loss, or weight gain
- Trouble concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Feeling hopeless or gloomy
- Feeling guilty, worthless, or helpless
- Thoughts of death or suicide or a suicide attempt
- Recurring aches and pains that don't respond to treatment

If you recently experienced a death or other loss, these feelings may be part of a normal grief reaction. But if these feelings persist with no lifting mood, ask for help.

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, National Mental Health Information Center. (n.d.). *How to deal with grief*. (Pub. No. KEN-01-0104). Retrieved February 2, 2015, from <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov>

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