



The Community Hospice Grief Center

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What Does Grief Feel Like?

Grieving is the natural response to loss, a gradual process of healing. Grieving is not about “getting over” the death. It is about expressing your sorrow, sharing your memories, and learning how to go forward with your life. Grief is not a mental illness, but it can sometimes feel like depression or anxiety.

Each person grieves in their own way and at their own pace. Not everyone will experience all of what is discussed here, but these are some of the most common reactions. There is no timetable for grieving, no exact moment when you should “feel better.” However, grieving is about healing, and most of the intense feelings of grief do become less frequent and less intense over time. With time, you will find that your memories bring more pleasure than pain.

Emotional Reactions

Many people describe grief as an emotional roller coaster – some days are good, some are bad, and some days you just feel numb. The key to getting through it is to allow yourself to feel the feelings as they come. Because the grief experience is uncomfortable, many people try to avoid these feelings, shutting them down or pushing them aside. Unfortunately, this tactic rarely works for long – buried grief feelings can emerge later as emotional difficulties or relationship problems. Unacknowledged grief can also lead to problems with alcohol, drug use, or other destructive behaviors.

Many feelings accompany grief, not just sadness. Some of the most common include:

numbness, shock	disbelief
sense of unreality	helplessness
anger	worry
fear, anxiety, panic	loneliness, isolation
frustration	shame
irritability	relief that deceased’s suffering has
guilt	ended or that a bad relationship is over

Many griever feel as if they have lost control of their emotions, or as if they are “going crazy,” never knowing how they will feel from one moment to the next. Painful as these feelings can be, they are all part of the natural response to the death of someone loved. Expect ups and downs, and be patient with yourself.

Physical Reactions

Since our emotions affect our bodies, it is reasonable to expect some physical symptoms during grief. It is normal to have changes in sleep patterns – difficulty getting to sleep, waking up in the middle of the night, or wanting to sleep all the time. Changes in appetite are also common, as is exhaustion – grief takes a lot of energy. Headaches, muscle stiffness, and stomach upsets are experienced by many griever. Some people find themselves jumpy and restless, or overly sensitive to loud noises or other people. A pounding or racing heartbeat, dizziness, or chest tightness may also occur.

Some grievors become afraid that they may have a serious illness, or find themselves experiencing symptoms similar to those of the deceased.

Take care of yourself. Getting regular exercise can help you sleep better, lowers your risk of depression, and can boost your immune system. Try to eat regular, nutritious meals. As best you can, try to get enough sleep – take naps during the day if you find you can't sleep at night, and rest as much as you need to. Lighten your schedule as much as possible, and don't be too hard on yourself when you can't get as much done as you're used to. While physical symptoms are often a part of normal grief, any physical conditions that are worrisome should be evaluated by a doctor.

Thoughts and Behaviors

Frequent and unexpected bouts of crying are common in grief, and most people expect such reactions. However, there are other, less well-known but equally common thoughts and behaviors that accompany grief.

It is normal to have difficulty concentrating, remembering things, or making decisions. Many grieving people describe themselves as “going around in a fog.”

Some grieving persons may have little energy for or interest in others or for activities which formerly provided pleasure. Others may feel a need to be with other people, to talk a lot and retell stories of the deceased over and over.

Vivid dreams or nightmares about the person who has died are common, especially in the early weeks after the death. Many grievors may also experience the sense that they are hearing or seeing the deceased. These experiences can feel comforting, or they may be frightening. In either case, they are common and quite normal.

Some grievors experience a vague longing to join their loved one or to escape from the pain of the loss. Many people find such thoughts and feelings frightening. It may be comforting to know that they are not uncommon and do not mean that the grieving person truly wishes to die. It is important to realize that these feelings are different from suicidal thoughts, which involve active plans about when and how to take one's own life. If at any point you are worried about such thoughts, seek help from your doctor or a qualified mental health provider.

Spiritual issues and questions are also common after a death. Some people find themselves questioning their beliefs and faith, while others may have a discovery or rediscovery of faith or spiritual understanding. Many people find themselves thinking more about the meaning of life, or about what follows this life.

Give yourself time. As much as possible, postpone making major decisions; if circumstances allow, don't change jobs, move, or make any large changes to your life until the intensity of your grieving subsides. Remember that personal faith does not make one immune to grief, or to the spiritual doubts grief can raise. Find safe avenues to explore your feelings, thoughts, and questions, and take spiritual comfort where you can.

Coping with Grief

Sometimes grief feels so overwhelming you wonder if you can survive it. It is important to remember there are some things you can do to make your grief more bearable. These include taking care of your body; exploring healing ways to express your thoughts and feelings; sharing memories of your loved; and finding safe sources of support.

Be patient with yourself as you get used to all the changes your loss brings. Remember, healing doesn't mean forgetting the person who died. That person, and your relationship with them, will always be a part of you, kept alive in your memories.