

Grief is a normal, healthy response to the loss of someone or something significant. The thoughts, emotions and behaviors that characterize grief are part of a healing process that takes time and patience to work through. While grief is a universal human experience, it is also deeply personal. What triggers it, the particular emotions elicited, the way those feelings are expressed—even the amount of time it takes to recover and move forward—are different for each individual. It's important to understand this whether you are grieving or trying to support someone who is.

DEFINING LOSS

We typically associate grief with the death of a loved one or the breakup of a long relationship. But other forms of loss or change (which is at the heart of loss) can trigger grief, for example: the death of a pet, personal illness or disability, job loss, retirement, relocation/moving, aging/loss of youth, even graduation from high school or college.

Just the prospect of loss or change can initiate grief – for example facing a loved one's terminal illness. Sudden, unanticipated losses—such as death due to accident, a homicide or suicide; witnessing or being involved in a violent event; experiencing a natural disaster—can be particularly painful, or traumatic, because there is no time to prepare for them.

COMMON SYMPTOMS OF GRIEF

Our responses to loss and change are influenced by our personality/temperament, cultural background, and a host of other factors. However, some common responses include:

- Deep sadness/despair
- Denial, shock or numbness
- Emptiness, loneliness and yearning
- Guilt or regret
- Anger and resentment
- Fear, anxiety/panic attacks, helplessness and insecurity

Similarly, there is no “normal” when it comes to how individuals express these emotions. For example, crying is a common way of expressing sadness, but a lack of tears does not mean an individual is feeling the pain any less deeply, simply that he or she expresses it differently. Although we tend to think of grief as a cognitive (thought-related) process, there can be physical symptoms, too, such as lack of energy, weight loss or gain, sleep problems, aches and pains with no obvious cause, or reduced immunity.

HOW LONG GRIEF LASTS

The intensity and duration of grief varies considerably not just between people who have experienced a similar loss, but even within the same individual at different points in his or her life. The period immediately following the loss/change is typically characterized by the most overwhelming and omnipresent symptoms, or “acute grief.” As time passes the emotions should wax and wane so that painful experiences are increasingly intermingled with more positive feelings. The goal of grieving is not to eliminate all the pain or memories of the loss. Rather, it is to reorganize one's life so that the loss is no longer the center of it, although it may remain an important part of it.

OBSTACLES TO HEALING

Misconceptions about grief—such as it’s important to “be strong” or to “move on with life” within a set time period, or that it is inappropriate to show emotions except at certain times or places—can hinder recovery. The only way to heal is to actively deal with the emotions. Attempts to cope without experiencing the pain can lead to destructive behaviors such as alcohol or drug abuse, which simply mask the symptoms.

Symptoms that persist without improvement or worsen over time, are cause for concern. In this state of “complicated grief,” a person is unable to function normally and may even entertain suicidal thoughts. Individuals with a pre-existing vulnerability such as a mood disorder or those who have experienced a traumatic loss tend to be more susceptible. In fact, complicated grief shares characteristics that are similar to both depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Targeted therapies such as complicated grief treatment (CGT), which combines cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques with aspects of interpersonal psychotherapy, have proved particularly effective. Anti-depressants medications may be helpful in some instances, but only in combination with therapy.