

Grief and Grieving

Table of Contents

- Topic Overview
 - What Happens
 - Treatment Overview
 - When to Call a Doctor
 - Home Treatment
 - Other Places To Get Help
 - Related Information
 - Credits
 - Appendix
 - Grief: Coping With Grief
 - Grief: Helping Older Adults With Grief
-

Topic Overview

What is grief?

Grief is a natural response to the loss of someone or something very important to you. The loss may cause sadness and may cause you to think of very little else besides the loss. The words sorrow and heartache are often used to describe feelings of grief.

Anticipatory grief is grief that strikes in advance of an impending loss. You may feel anticipatory grief for a loved one who is sick and dying. Anticipatory grief helps us prepare for loss.

What is grieving?

Grieving is the process of emotional and life adjustment you go through after a loss. Grieving after a loved one's death is also known as bereavement.

Grieving is a personal experience. Depending on who you are and the nature of your loss, your process of grieving will be different from another person's experience. There is no "normal and expected" period of time for grieving.

What are common symptoms of grief and grieving?

A wide range of feelings and symptoms are common during grieving. While you are feeling shock, numbness, sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, or fear, you may also find moments of relief, peace, or happiness. And although grieving is not simply sadness, "the blues," or depression, you may become depressed or overly anxious during the grieving process.

The stress of grief and grieving can take a physical toll on your body. Sleeplessness is common, as is a weakened immune system over time. If you have a chronic illness, grieving can make your condition worse.

How is grieving treated?

Social support, good self-care, and the passage of time are usually the best medicine for grieving. But if you find that your grief is making it difficult to function for more than a week or two, contact a grief counselor or bereavement support group for help.

If you have trouble functioning for longer than a couple of weeks because of depression or anxiety, talk to your doctor. Treatment with medicines or counseling can help speed your recovery.

Frequently Asked Questions

Learning grief and

- **about**What are grief and grieving?
- **grieving:**What causes grief?
- What are common symptoms of grief? What is
- the grieving process like?

Getting treatment: • How are grief and grieving treated?

- When should I call a doctor or counselor about grieving problems?
 - How can I cope with my grief?
 - How can I manage my feelings of grief? (See Grief: Coping With Grief in appendix) How can I
 - help a child who is grieving?
 - How can I help a teen who is grieving?
 - How can I help an older adult who is grieving? (See Grief: Helping Older Adults With Grief in appendix)
-

What Happens

Grieving a significant loss takes time. Depending on the circumstances of your loss, grieving can take weeks to years. Grieving helps you gradually adjust to a new chapter of your life.

Becoming aware of a loss

Full awareness of a major loss can happen suddenly or over a few days or weeks. While an expected loss (such as a death after a long illness) can take a short time to absorb, a sudden or tragic loss can take more time. Similarly, it can take time to grasp the reality of a loss that doesn't affect your daily routine, such as a death in a distant city.

During this time, you may feel numb and seem distracted. You may search or yearn for your lost loved one. Funerals and other rituals and events during this time may help you accept the reality of your loss.

Feeling and expressing grief

Your way of feeling and expressing grief is unique to you and the nature of your loss. You may find that you feel irritable and restless, are quieter than usual, or need to be distant from or close to others. Or you may find that you aren't the same person you were before the loss. Don't be surprised if you experience conflicting feelings while grieving. For example, it's normal to feel despair about a death or a job loss yet also feel relief.

The grieving process does not happen in a step-by-step or orderly fashion. Grieving tends to be unpredictable, with sad thoughts and feelings coming and going, like a roller-coaster ride. After the early days of grieving, you may sense a lifting of numbness and sadness and experience a few days without tears. Then, for no apparent reason, the intense grief may strike again.

While grieving may make you want to isolate yourself from others and hold it all in, it's important that you find some way of expressing your grief. Use whatever mode of expression works for you. Talking, writing, creating art or music, or being physically active are all ways of expressing grief.

Spirituality often is part of the grieving process. You may find yourself looking for or questioning the higher purpose of a loss. While you may gain comfort from your religious or spiritual beliefs, you might also be moved to doubt your beliefs in the face of traumatic or senseless loss.

Grieving problems. In this complex and busy world, it can be hard to fully grieve a loss. It is possible to have unresolved grief or complications associated with grieving, particularly if you:

- Had several major losses in a short period of time.
- Lost someone very important in your life. You may feel that you will never get over the loss of someone special.
- Experienced the unexpected or violent death of a loved one, such as the death of a child or a death caused by an accident, a homicide, or a suicide.
- Have special life circumstances that act as obstacles to grieving, such as having to return to work too soon after a death. Have a history of depression or anxiety.
-

Adjusting to a loss

It can take years to go through a grieving process. Feelings of grief may return during holidays, birthdays, and other special events.

With loss, your sense of self and security is disrupted. It may help to develop or strengthen connections with other people, places, or activities. These new parts of your life are not meant to replace what you have lost. Instead, they serve to support you.

Treatment Overview

Grief itself is a natural response that doesn't require medical treatment. But sometimes people need help getting through the grieving process.

Initial grief

- **Medicine.** During the initial days of grief, anxiety or sleeplessness can make it difficult to function. If you suffer more than a few days of severe agitation, talk to your doctor about whether a short-term prescription sedative medicine can help you. (Doctors disagree about the usefulness of medicines for people who are grieving. Some doctors believe that giving medicines for anxiety or sleep may interfere with the ability to grieve.)
- **Counseling.** If you find that obstacles to grieving are making it difficult to function after a loss, talk to a grief counselor, attend a bereavement support group, or both. Counseling and support groups can also help you work through unresolved grief from a past loss.

Chronic grief and complications

If you or someone you know exhibits suicidal behavior (such as thinking you cannot stop yourself from harming or killing yourself), **call 911 or other emergency services immediately.**

If you find that a major loss has caused complications, such as depression, prolonged anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or severe and prolonged grief, see your doctor and a grief counselor for treatment.

If you have a chronic medical condition that has been made worse by the emotional and physical stress of grief, **see your doctor immediately.**

When to Call a Doctor

If you or someone you know develops complications of grief, such as disturbing or suicidal thoughts, depression, or anxiety, get help.

Call 911 or other emergency services if:

- You think you cannot stop yourself from harming or killing yourself. You hear
- voices that frighten you, especially if the voices tell you to hurt yourself or other people.
- Someone who is grieving tries to harm himself or herself or someone else.
- Someone who is grieving threatens to hurt someone else or makes threats of suicide.

Call a doctor if:

- You feel hopeless and detached for more than a couple of weeks.
- You cannot stop yourself from thinking about death or suicide. You have a
- sudden change in your behavior that concerns you, such as drinking more alcohol than you normally do.
- You have been grieving longer than you think is good for you. Someone you
- know has symptoms of depression. These symptoms include feeling sad and losing interest in most daily activities.

Who to see?

Counseling is best done by a mental health professional with experience in grief counseling, such as a:

- Clinical social worker.
- Psychologist.
- Licensed professional counselor.
- Psychiatrist, who can prescribe medicine to control symptoms. Some psychiatrists also offer counseling.

Health professionals who can help you if you are having medical or mental health problems requiring medicine include:

- General practitioners.
 - Family medicine doctors.
 - Internists.
 - Psychiatrists.
 - Physician assistants.
 - Nurse practitioners.
-

Home Treatment

Coping with grief

Home treatment plays an important role in working through the grieving process. Talking about the loss, sharing cares and concerns, and getting support from others are very important components of healthy grieving.

If you are caring for a dying loved one, it is important to take good care of yourself also. When you know that a loss is approaching, especially if you are able to participate in the care of a loved one who is dying, you may be better able to recognize and deal with your feelings of grief. It is important that you get caregiver support to help you care for your loved one as well as to help you prepare for your loss.

If you have just had a major loss in your life, it is important to:

- **Get enough rest and sleep.** During sleep, your mind makes sense of what is happening in your life. Not getting enough rest and sleep can lead to physical illness and exhaustion. Try activities to help you relax, such as meditation or guided imagery.
- **Eat nourishing foods.** Resist the urge not to eat or to eat only those foods that comfort you. If you have trouble eating alone, ask another person to join you for a snack or meal. If you do not have an appetite, eat frequent small meals and snacks. Consider taking a multivitamin daily.
- **Exercise.** If nothing else, take a walk. Brisk walking and other forms of exercise, such as yoga or tai chi and qi gong, can help release some of your pent-up emotions.

- **Comfort yourself.** Allow yourself the opportunity to be comforted by familiar surroundings and personal items that you value. Special items, such as photos or a loved one's favorite shirt, may also give you comfort.

Treat yourself to something you enjoy, such as a massage. ● **Try to stay involved.** Staying involved in activities that include your support network, such as work, church, or community activities, may help you as you grieve.

To help you work through the grieving process, make sure to:

- **Surround yourself with loved ones.** You may feel lonely and separate from other people when you are grieving. You may think that no one else can understand the depth of your feelings. Surrounding yourself with loved ones and talking about your feelings and concerns may help you feel more connected with other people and less lonely.
- **Get involved.** Take part in the activities that occur as a result of the loss, such as making funeral arrangements.
- **Avoid quick fixes.** Resist the urge to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or take nonprescription medicines (such as sleeping aids). When you are under emotional stress, these may only add to your unpleasant feelings and experiences and may mask your emotions and prevent you from normal, necessary grieving.
- **Ask for help.** During times of emotional distress it is important to allow other people to take over some of your responsibilities. Other people often feel the need to show you how much they care about you.

Grief: Coping With Grief (See Grief: Coping With Grief in appendix)

Helping others cope with grief

There are many ways that family members and other people close to a person who is grieving can give help and support. The best way to help a grieving person often depends on how well the person was prepared for the loss, the person's perception of death, and his or her personality and coping style. The person's age and stage of emotional development are also important to think about when you are helping a person who is grieving.

If someone you know is grieving:

- Encourage the person to grieve at his or her own pace. The grieving process does not happen in a step-by-step or orderly fashion. There will be good days and bad days. Do not try to "fix" the person's grief. Provide support and be willing to listen.
- Be sensitive to the effect of your words. But don't ignore the person who is grieving just because you aren't sure what to say. Check in regularly during

the first year and beyond, especially on important days, including the anniversary of the death, holidays, and birthdays.

- Recognize that this person's life has changed forever. Encourage the person to participate in activities that involve and build his or her support network.
- Respect the person's personal beliefs. Listen to his or her feelings without making judgments. Do not try to change the person's beliefs or feelings.

Helping young children who are grieving can be challenging for adult caregivers. The best way to help a child varies according to age and emotional development.

Grief: Helping Children With Grief

Teens may need special consideration and care when they are grieving. Many times it is hard to know how to approach and help a teen in these circumstances.

Grief: Helping Teens With Grief

Older adults may not express grief in the same way as other adults. Older adults are more likely to become physically ill after a major loss. They may already have a chronic physical illness or other conditions that interfere with their ability to grieve or that become worse when they are grieving. Also, older adults may be likely to develop complications associated with grieving. Older adults may be more likely than other people to experience several losses in a short period of time.

Grief: Helping Older Adults With Grief (See Grief: Helping Older Adults With Grief in appendix)

Other Places To Get Help

Organization

National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization: Caring Connections (U.S.)
www.caringinfo.org

Related Information

- Care at the End of Life
 - Depression
 - Depression in Children and Teens
 - Family Life Cycle
 - Support Groups and Social Support
-

Credits for Grief and Grieving

By Healthwise Staff

Primary Medical Reviewer Anne C. Poinier, MD - Internal Medicine

John Pope, MD - Pediatrics

Adam Husney, MD - Family Medicine

Kathleen Romito, MD - Family Medicine

Specialist Medical Reviewer Jean S. Kutner, MD, MSPH - Geriatric Medicine,

Current as of October 6, 2017

Overview

- Grief is a normal and healthy reaction that occurs when you lose someone or something important. Although it is possible to delay or postpone grieving, it is not possible to avoid grieving altogether.
- Grief will subside over time. However, the grieving process does not happen in a step-by-step or orderly fashion. Give yourself all the time you need to identify, accept, and express your emotions.
- Your feelings are unique. Each person handles emotions and feelings differently. Find the way to deal with your emotions that fits you. Support is
- important during the grieving process. Support comes in many forms, such as from friends and family, by participating in activities you enjoy, or through exercises to help you express your feelings, such as writing letters or keeping a journal.

How can I manage my grief?

Identify your feelings

Sometimes after a loss, it is hard to figure out exactly what you are feeling. You may have several feelings at the same time or conflicting feelings, such as sadness and relief. Writing is a good way to identify what you are feeling. Writing about what you feel can:

- **Stimulate thinking** and help you organize and analyze your thoughts.
- **Deepen your understanding** of a situation and may help you get in touch with feelings you had not recognized before.
- **Prompt you to reflect** on what is happening to you. This can help you put things into perspective and come to an understanding of how the changes affect your life.

When you are ready:

- Set aside time to write.
- Choose a private, comfortable place to do your writing.
- Choose a method of writing. You may choose to write a letter to your loved one, for example, or a poem or story.
- Don't worry about how well you write. Write about everyday occurrences or conversations you have had.
- Write what you feel. Don't screen your thoughts; give yourself permission to write whatever comes to mind. Strong feelings (such as fear, anger, or frustration) may arise. Write about simple pleasures and joys you have experienced, too. If you have concerns about your strong feelings, talk with a trusted friend, member of the clergy, or mental health professional.

Accept your feelings

- Many people find it helpful to talk to other people. Try to resist the urge to be quiet around or avoid people. If you are having trouble talking about your feelings with family members and friends, consider joining a bereavement support group.
- Express your emotions. You may feel that this is a sign of weakness, or that you won't be able to control yourself if you show your emotions. None of these is true. However, if you are afraid that you might harm yourself or someone else if you express an emotion, talk with someone you trust, your health professional, or a mental health professional about your concerns.
- Be patient and kind to yourself. Your feelings may be unpredictable and uncomfortable. Remind yourself that your uncomfortable feelings are expected and will fade as time goes on.

Handling difficult feelings

Each person handles emotion differently. Here are some ideas about how to deal with some of the most common feelings during the grieving process:

- Dealing with worry and anxiety
- Getting past feeling guilty
- Handling feelings of insecurity
- Handling sadness and yearning
- Overcoming spiritual turmoil
- Overcoming frustration and anger

Credits for Grief: Coping With Grief

By Healthwise Staff

Primary Medical Reviewer Anne C. Poinier, MD - Internal Medicine

Adam Husney, MD - Family Medicine

Specialist Medical Reviewer Jean S. Kutner, MD, MSPH - Geriatric Medicine,
Palliative Medicine
Kathleen Romito, MD - Family Medicine

Current as of May 5, 2017

Overview

- Older adults often have many major losses within a short period of time. For example, an older adult who loses a partner may suffer many losses, including financial security, his or her best friend, and social contacts. The
- natural aging process brings many losses, such as loss of independence and physical strength.
- Older adults may seem to overreact to a minor loss. What is considered a minor loss may bring memories and feelings about a previous greater loss.

How can you help an older adult who is grieving?

Ways you can help an older adult who is grieving include:

- Giving the person time. Sometimes older adults need more time to become aware of their feelings and express them. Sometimes they need more time to complete other activities as well. Giving an older person extra time shows that you are concerned and respectful of the person's needs.
- Pointing out signs of sadness or changes in behavior. This may help the person become aware of his or her feelings and may help the person feel more comfortable talking with you about how he or she feels.
- Spending time with the person. An older adult who often seems to be alone can benefit from your company. Invite him or her to go for a walk or have a cup of coffee. Feelings of loneliness may last for a long time when an older adult has lost something or someone special, especially a spouse.
- Talking about the loss. Ask the person to talk about his or her loss. Older people, especially those who have experienced several losses over a short period of time, are often helped by sharing memories of the lost person.
- Watching for signs of prolonged grieving or depression. If you have concerns that an older adult is having difficulty working through his or her grieving, talk with a health professional.

Older adults often have more than one loss to deal with at a time. Talking about each separate loss may help identify the person's feelings. Separating losses from one another may also help the person feel less overwhelmed and more able to cope with emotional distress.

Credits for Grief: Helping Older Adults With Grief

By Healthwise Staff

Primary Medical Reviewer Anne C. Poinier, MD - Internal Medicine

Adam Husney, MD - Family Medicine

Specialist Medical Reviewer Jean S. Kutner, MD, MSPH - Geriatric Medicine,
Palliative Medicine

Kathleen Romito, MD - Family Medicine

Current as of May 2, 2017



© 1995-2017 Healthwise, Incorporated. Healthwise, Healthwise for every health decision, and the Healthwise logo are trademarks of Healthwise, Incorporated. This information does not replace the advice of a doctor. Healthwise, Incorporated disclaims any warranty or liability for your use of this information.

CISM Hotline 214-640-4380 SWA/TWU 556