

Dealing With Grief After Death

Grief

Grief is a natural response to loss. Grief can be like a roller coaster with ups and downs. It can be worse in the beginning and less intense over time.

Common Responses to Death

■ Shock

Many people feel numb or stunned after a death. Others feel physically and emotionally agitated and find it hard to be still or to “think straight.” Shock takes many forms.

Most people experience shock when someone close to them dies, even when the death has been expected.

■ Anger

It is common to feel anger or rage after a death. Often, it is connected to sadness that a beloved person is dead. You may even be angry at the person who died, leaving you with unresolved anger.

Anger may also be about:

- words not said or words unfinished
- the way the person died
- when the death occurred.

■ Sadness

Perhaps the most common response to death is sadness. You may feel alone or lost. Sorrow may seem to well up from deep inside and color every part of your life in the time that follows the death of someone you love. Even years later, there can still be times of great sadness.

■ Other feelings

There are other feelings and thoughts that often arise when someone dies. These include fear, guilt, denial, relief and disbelief.

It is common to feel many emotions, not just one, or to feel differently on different days. At times, there may not be any strong emotion at all — just the feeling of being numb.

In addition to emotional feelings, you may have other problems, including:

- tightness in the throat or chest, loss of appetite or problems sleeping
- problems concentrating or making decisions
- avoidance of your own feelings by focusing on taking care of others
- mood changes over the slightest things
- crying at unexpected times or in unexpected places
- a sense of unreality.

Grieving takes time. As much as you may want the grief to be over now, it takes time. For many people, grief can last as long as 2 or more years after the death.

The legacy and memory of your loved one in your life will likely continue for a long time. Because of this, there will be reminders that can create moments or periods of sadness long after the death. This does not mean that you did not grieve well at an earlier time. It just means that you will continue to have moments of sadness and a sense of loss.

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How to Take Care of Yourself

- Give yourself room to grieve. Remember that the amount of time that one person needs when dealing with any of these feelings and reactions will be different from the time another person needs.
- Ask others for help. When shock and other feelings are especially strong, it can be hard to make clear decisions. Get help with financial and legal decisions if you are unsure of what to do.
- Practice good self-care. Take care of your personal needs like getting enough sleep and eating healthful foods. Maintain your normal routine as much as possible.
- Take time. Give yourself time for both grieving and decision-making. Avoid making quick decisions about anything.
- Respect the grieving process of other friends or family members. Allow each other space and time for the way each person needs to cope.
- Consider using rituals of closure. You may want to plant a tree in the memory of a loved one or make a donation in his or her name.
- Keep meaningful things. Keeping special items reminds you of those who have played important roles in your life.
- Plan ahead for holidays and special occasions. Choose carefully which activities you will participate in and with whom you will be. Think about how you will honor the memory of your loved one at these times.

When Children Grieve

Children grieve, too. Children, especially younger than age 12, are usually quite basic in their thinking and use of language.

Children need to feel safe, emotionally and physically, before they can share difficult feelings. They need a strong relationship with at least one trusted adult in order to explore their feelings of grief. Let children express their feelings and concerns freely.

When talking to children about death, be honest and talk with them in language they can understand. Do not say a person is “asleep” or “has gone on a trip.” This will likely confuse or even disturb children.

Be sure the child understands what caused the death. Sometimes children can imagine something they said or did caused the death. If they hear someone died in their sleep, they may fear that they, too, may die in their sleep.

As children grow and mature, it will be important to talk with them about the death so their understanding of it can grow.

It is not necessary for adults to hide their grieving from children. However, children and adolescents can become frightened after a death if it appears the key adults in their lives are emotionally out of control or distant.

It is important that children be assured that, in spite of the death, they will be cared for and safe. If you are concerned your grief will make you emotionally unavailable for your children, invite someone you trust to help out for a time.

When to Get Help

Make an appointment with your primary care provider or mental health provider if you feel you need additional support to help you cope with your grief. If you are having feelings of self-harm or suicide, get help right away.