



Dealing with Grief

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NORTHSTAR COMPASS

*Navigating
Toward Better
Emotional
Health*



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“It is natural and normal to mourn the loss of anything that is morally good or even morally neutral. However, destructive or inappropriate grief can lead to serious depression. We grieve for that which we have lost because we have become attached to certain people, places, ideas and things. The extent of the grief is determined by the degree of attachment we had, whether appropriate or otherwise.” (Anderson and Baumchen, p. 220-221).

STAGES OF GRIEF

Grieving is a process, an emotional journey of learning to cope with loss, and it can last a long time. The normal grieving process allows us to let go and continue on in a healthy way. When experiencing a loss, people typically go through a predictable cycle.

- Denial of the situation, saying, “this can’t be happening.”
- Anger, asking “why is this happening to me?” or “it’s not fair!”
- Bargaining and telling themselves “Maybe I can change this.”
- Acceptance comes when reality sets in and the grieving person acknowledges they cannot change the situation. They begin to reconstruct their life of and find enjoyment in it again.

As people navigate this process there may be times they seem very disorganized and have trouble concentrating. They may difficulty remembering things, find day-to-day living a challenge, have times of depression, and feel very tired. Weight loss, trouble sleeping, and feeling of guilt are common in the grief process. Although the stages of grief are predictable, everyone respond differently, and often in a different order. The process can take weeks, months, or even longer.

Several factors may influence a person's reaction to loss and affect the severity and duration of each stage:

- Mental state/stability
- Support system
- The nature of the relationship
- Past experiences and beliefs
- Circumstances of the death

COMPLICATED GRIEF

Instead of acceptance, some fall into depression and hopelessness, which can develop into a more serious problem called complicated or destructive grief. Complicated grief is similar to the natural grieving process, but instead of gradually subsiding, persists for more than six months, and may even increase. Many who sufferer complicated grief describe feeling "stuck", with the inability to pull themselves out of a heightened state of mourning. Signs and symptoms of complicated grief can include:

- Persistent, painful yearning for their loved one
- Constant thoughts and images of loved one
- Unrelenting anger and bitterness
- Desperate loneliness and helplessness



- Total loss/absence of meaning and purpose
- Heavy drinking or substance abuse
- Continued denial of the death
- Severely disrupted sleep
- Inability to function normally
- Inability to trust others
- Isolation
- Wanting to die

RISK FACTORS

Although researchers are unsure what causes of complicated grief, they have identified some factors that may increase the risk of developing it, including:

- The loved one's death was perceived as preventable
- The death was traumatic, sudden, premature, or by suicide
- A history of depression, anxiety, or other types of emotional instability
- The relationship had unresolved issues or conflict
- Significant emotional dependence on the deceased
- Lack of a support system

HELP FOR COMPLICATED GRIEF

A therapist can help with topics as grief reactions, complicated grief symptoms, adjusting to loss and redefining life's goals. Therapy can help explore and

process emotions, improve coping skills, and reduce feelings of blame and guilt.

If symptoms of depression linger, an antidepressant medicine may help reduce certain complicated grief symptoms.

GUARDING AGAINST COMPLICATED GRIEF

The following may help:

- **Allow yourself to feel the pain.** Grieving is a painful but necessary process. Work through difficult emotions and allow them to heal.
- **Be patient.** The process takes time. Recovery may look different than anyone else's and needs to be worked through at an individual pace and on each person's terms.
- **Talk things out.** Find a trusted, compassionate friend or family member who is a good listener. Get together with them consistently and allow yourself to talk, cry, and express your emotions.
- **Avoid unnecessary changes.** Wait for a few months before adding additional stressors (such as changing jobs or moving) to life. Maintaining some normalcy will give a sense of security.
- **Take care of your body.** Eat good, nutritious food, get plenty of exercise, and try to maintain a regular sleep schedule. Physical activity releases stress and helps you sleep and feel better.
- **Confront difficult emotions and feelings of regret.** Forgive yourself, learn from it, and move on. Get help if you are feeling "stuck."
- **Avoid self-medicating.** Falling into the habit of dulling your pain with alcohol and drugs will only make things worse.
- **Plan ahead for special occasions.** The first Christmas, birthday, anniversary, etc., will be difficult. Plan to do something special with others who understand and identify with your pain and loss. Create new memories.
- **Stay connected.** Be intentional about spending time with people who can let you cry and make you laugh. Pursue friendships that are uplifting and supportive. Join a social club or volunteer for a cause valued by your loved one.
- **Set new goals.** Choose to look forward and into the future. This may be as simple as planning a weekend away or learning a new skill. Do something proactive to help you find enjoyable activities.
- **Join a grief support group.** It is therapeutic to be with people who are experiencing similar emotions and challenges

HOW TO HELP SOMEONE WHO IS GRIEVING

Acknowledge the death. Even if it seems awkward at first, honestly and genuinely express your feelings of concern. If you ignore the situation, they may question whether you care.

Offer help. Be specific by designating a time and place. For example, say “Can I bring lasagna over for you on Thursday evening?” instead of “Let me know if you’d like me to bring supper over for you sometime?”

Ask how they are feeling. Open-ended questions will help them open up. Asking “What are you thinking about today?” will encourage them to talk, while “How are you?” invites a one word answer.

Be a good listener when they are ready to talk. Let them express emotion without trying to solve problems. Acknowledge the emotion without making judgments about whether it is right or wrong.

Be available for them. Invite them to social activities and include them in events whenever possible. Don’t allow them to isolate themselves.

Continue to support them after the initial shock wears off. The grieving process sometimes takes months or years. After the initial flood of support is gone, your support and encouragement may be even more important.

If needed, encourage them to get professional help.

SOURCE: Anderson, N.T. & Baumchen, H.A. (1999) *Finding hope again*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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He received his Master’s Degree from Wheaton Graduate School, his Doctorate of Psychology (PsyD) from the Illinois School of Professional Psychology, and his Certificate in Co-Occurring Disorders from Adler Graduate School. He serves frequently as a seminar leader, and has taught workshops in the USA, Canada, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and India.

He is the author of *Journeys* and *Destinations*, two books on co-occurring disorders treatment, and the co-author of *Finding Hope Again: Overcoming Depression* with Dr. Neil T. Anderson.

This information in this publication is not intended as a substitute for professional help or to be used as a diagnostic tool. If you have serious difficulties with anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues, please seek professional help.