

# Types of Grief and Loss

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## **Anticipatory Mourning**

When a person or family is expecting death, it is normal to begin to anticipate how one will react and cope when that person eventually dies. Many family members will try to envision their life without that person and mentally play out possible scenarios, which may include grief reactions and ways they will mourn and adjust after the death.

Anticipatory mourning includes feelings of loss, concern for the dying person, balancing conflicting demands and preparing for death. Anticipatory mourning is a natural process that enables the family more time to slowly prepare for the reality of the loss. People are often able to complete unfinished “business” with the dying person (for example, saying “good-bye,” “I love you,” or “I forgive you”).

## **Sudden Loss**

Grief experienced after a sudden, unexpected death is different from anticipatory mourning. Sudden, unexpected loss may exceed the coping abilities of a person, which often results in feelings of being overwhelmed and/or unable to function. Even though one may be able to acknowledge that loss has occurred, the full impact of loss may take much longer to fully comprehend than in the case of an expected loss.

## **Complicated Grief**

There are times when grief does not progress as expected; the intensity and duration of grief is prolonged and dramatically interferes with a person’s ability to function. Symptoms of depression and anxiety may be prevalent and prolonged. Thoughts, feelings, behaviors and reactions may seem to persist over long periods of time with little change or improvement. In these situations, it is important to seek help from a qualified professional who can assess your individual situation and make recommendations that will help. It is important to seek help; complicated grief does not subside on its own.

# Grieving During the Holidays

## Twelve Practical Tips for Saying, Doing the Right Things

While many people look forward to yearly holiday traditions, gatherings with family and friends and the general good feelings associated with the season, some people dread the holidays. For those who have lost a loved one during the past year, the holidays may emphasize their grief.

The holidays, especially the first ones after losing a loved one, are especially difficult for people who are grieving. Often, friends and family members of those affected by a loss are unsure how to act or what to say to support their grieving loved one during the holidays.

Here are some suggestions:

1. Be supportive of the way the person chooses to handle the holidays. Some may wish to follow traditions; others may choose to change their rituals. Remember, there is no right way or wrong way to handle the holidays.
2. Offer to help the person with baking and/or cleaning. Both tasks can be overwhelming for one trying to deal with raw emotions.
3. Offer to help him or her decorate for the holidays.
4. Offer to help with holiday shopping or give your loved one catalogs or on-line shopping sites that may be helpful.
5. Invite the person to attend a religious service with you and your family.
6. Invite your loved one to your home for the holidays.
7. Help your loved one prepare and mail holiday cards.
8. Ask the person if he or she is interested in volunteering with you during the holiday season. Doing something for someone else, such as helping at soup

kitchens or working with children, may help your loved one feel better about the holidays.

9. Donate a gift or money in memory of the person's loved one. Remind the person that his or her special person is not forgotten.
10. Never tell someone that he or she should be "over it." Instead, give the person hope that, eventually, he or she will enjoy the holidays again.
11. If he or she wants to talk about the deceased loved one or feelings associated with the loss, LISTEN. Active listening from friends is an important step to helping him or her heal. Don't worry about being conversational... just listen.
12. Remind the person you are thinking of him or her and the loved one who died. Cards, phone calls and visits are great ways to stay in touch.

In general, the best way to help those who are grieving during the holidays is to let them know you care. They need to be remembered, and they need to know their loved ones are remembered, too. Local hospice grief counselors emphasize that friends and family members should never be afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing, because making an effort and showing concern will be appreciated.

Many people are not aware that their community hospice is a valuable resource that can help people who are struggling with grief and loss. Hospices provide bereavement support to the families they serve and often offer services to other members of the community as well.

More information about hospice and grief is available from NHPCO's CaringInfo or by calling the HelpLine at 1-800-658-8898.

## **Grief and Loss Following Traumas and Disasters**

Everyone has been affected in some way by tragedies that have occurred in recent years, from the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, the events on September 11, 2001, tsunamis and earthquakes. Even if not directly affected, most people either know someone who lived where these events have happened or they have been there

themselves. Perhaps you are wondering, “Why did this happen?” “What is happening in the world?!” “How do I cope?” “How do we go on?” “Are my feelings normal?”

Many people have been touched by these events at a deep, human level. The ranges of emotions you experience are normal reactions to very unusual and abnormal events. If you feel apprehensive, confused, or uncertain, it is probably related to the fact that these were very frightening events. You may have never been touched in this way by so many different, horrific situations. Understand that you may continue to experience unusual thoughts or feelings for weeks and even months after a scary event or disaster.

Take time to understand your reactions. Look within yourself to figure out what you need to do to cope and take care of yourself, both mentally and physically. Some of the normal reactions you may have include:

- Difficulty focusing
- Lack of appetite
- Difficulty sleeping
- Increased headaches or tiredness
- Feelings of guilt, anger, fear, anxiety
- Dreams or nightmares
- Frequent mood changes

If you have experienced other losses or stressful events in your life, your reactions may become even more complex. Just as you heal physically from major physical injuries, you can heal from emotional wounds. Your reactions mean you are grieving changes and learning to cope with loss. It is normal to experience these reactions, and part of what can help is taking the time to look at what you need to do to best adjust.

You may wonder if life will ever be ‘normal’ again—either for you, how you view the world, or for those more directly affected by the tragedies. You and the world around you have been changed by what has happened, but a sense of routine and ‘normalcy’ will eventually return. What develops is a ‘new normal,’ not a return to

how things were. As you make this change, if you are feeling helpless, remember there is still much that you can do at a personal and local level.

Consider some of the following actions that are healing and can be life-affirming:

- Acknowledge emotions as they arise – allow yourself to cry, or talk things through as you need to
- Seek out others who will listen
- Consider other forms of self-expression – journaling, poetry, music
- Exercise regularly and spend time outdoors in nature
- Maintain your day-to-day routine
- Reflect upon, reprioritize, or perhaps simplify your life
- Volunteer somewhere to make a difference
- Reach out to others, support a relief effort
- Talk to a counselor

Hospices throughout the country offer grief support to anyone in the community who has had a loss through death. Staffed with professional grief counselors, they are an additional resource for materials, support, and help. Find a hospice in your area or call 800/658-8898.

The American Red Cross has developed a nationwide program entitled Together We Prepare to help people gain the skills needed to prevent, prepare for, and respond to emergencies in homes, workplaces, communities, and the world. They have identified five ways individuals can feel better prepared: make a plan, build a kit, get trained, volunteer, and give blood.

Volunteering with local organizations such as the American Red Cross or a hospice in your community are ways you can become involved and make a difference in the lives of others. Activities such as these can help to offset some of the more distressing reactions you may be experiencing in trying times.