

# What is Grief?

Grief is the emotional response experienced after significant loss. You might experience physical symptoms such as feeling unwell and fatigued or emotional symptoms like confusion, anxiety or a strong longing for what you've lost.

Although grief is painful, it is a natural part of life and plays an important role in adjusting to a loss. The grieving process is different for everyone and may not occur in set emotional 'stages'. Some individuals may experience intense emotions immediately after a loss, while others may initially feel 'numb' or feel little difference from normal, with painful emotions arising later on and some may not ever have an intense response. Some may wish for company as they grieve, and others may prefer privacy. All of these are normal.

## *There is no 'correct' way to feel or to grieve.*

It is important to note that Emergency service workers may be impacted by grief to a greater degree than the general public. Emergency Service Workers are exposed to loss more frequently due to critical incidents at work, and experience traumatic grief as a result.

Exposure to fatalities at work may be prolonged, including responding on-scene, speaking to relatives of the deceased, writing reports and providing testimony in trials. It is not uncommon for those exposed to colleague or civilian deaths to develop 'survivor's guilt'.

Survivor's guilt is the experience of psychological distress due to surviving or escaping a situation relatively unharmed or unaffected, as compared to others.

Additionally, Emergency service workers may experience grief when serious injuries lead to a loss of a valued role, either for themselves or for a colleague.

## What Grief Looks Like

### Complicated vs Uncomplicated Grief

Anyone experiencing grief may benefit from grief counselling to facilitate the normal grieving process. As part of normal grief, most people will experience a period of suffering where they may notice some impact on their day-to-day functioning. This may last anywhere from weeks to years. After a period of mourning, most people are able to return to their previous level of functioning.

Others may experience a more complicated form of grief that would benefit from therapeutic support. Complicated grief may involve either a prolonged, intense grief response or a delayed, intense grief reaction (e.g., where grief initially appeared to be absent). Complicated grief may be difficult to define, as there is no set time limit or culturally accepted standard for normal grieving.

These symptoms may include:

- Difficulty sleeping.
- Anxiety, or depression.
- Identity disruption (such as feeling as though part of yourself has died).
- A sense of disbelief about the death.
- Avoidance of reminders that the person is dead.
- Intense emotional pain (such as anger, bitterness, sorrow).
- Difficulty with managing day to day tasks such as personal hygiene, and other self care activities.
- Intense longing for a person who has died or being preoccupied with thoughts about them
- Difficulty engaging with friends, pursuing interests or planning for the future.
- Emotional numbness (absence or marked reduction of emotional experience).
- Feeling that life is meaningless.
- Intense loneliness (feeling alone or detached from others).

If someone is experiencing several of these symptoms every day, and the death has occurred at least a year ago for adults, or six months for children and adolescents, they may be experiencing Prolonged Grief Disorder. Evidence based treatments are available, which may include elements of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

## Disenfranchised Grief

Disenfranchised grief is experienced when people experience a loss that "is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported". Individuals experiencing this may feel that they must hide their grief, which can make mourning the loss more difficult and lead to complicated forms of grief. Situations that can lead to disenfranchised grief, include where:

- the loss is not socially accepted as significant
- the relationship is not recognised by others
- the griever is excluded
- the griever may express grief in an unconventional way
- the circumstances of a death are stigmatised

Grief may arise after death and non-death losses. The following are examples of experiences that commonly lead to disenfranchised grief: divorce, miscarriage, abortion, loss of a job, death of a pet, dementia, etc.

It is important to recognise that any significant loss can lead to a profound grief response and that a type of silent, unacknowledged grief is commonly experienced.

If facing such circumstances, it is important to allow yourself to engage in the grieving process. This may include acknowledging the loss and the painful emotions this brings up, as well as adjusting to the changes, e.g. re-constructing or adapting your identity, worldview or environment, as one moves forward. Self-care during this time is very important, and social support may be helpful if available. If further support is required, it may benefit the person to seek grief counselling.

## Metaphors for Grief

### Rollercoaster

Some may find it helpful to understand the journey of grief as a confusing 'rollercoaster' of different emotions, with twists, turns, ups and downs and periods that may feel intense or smooth. Emotions may change swiftly, or linger for some time. Rather than trying to control the ride, accepting and surrendering to the journey may help with this process.

### Ocean Waves

Grief can also be thought of as ocean 'waves'. Sometimes, after a devastating loss, the storm is fierce, the waves appear tall and overwhelming, and all one can do is to try and stay afloat. These waves may gradually appear to decrease in size and frequency as time goes on, and sometimes these may even break gently on the shore. At certain points in time, a 'storm' may return, and the waves may grow again in height (anniversaries, holidays), nevertheless, one knows that these storms will not last forever, and they become less common as time goes on.

## Supporting Grief

Key components in recovery from grief appear to be moving towards acceptance of the loss, allowing yourself to experience the pain of grief, adjusting to your new reality, and Honouring your changed but continuing bonds with the deceased (if bereaved). For some people, spiritual and/or religious practices and support may also be helpful in adjusting to the loss and exploring any existential concerns this brings.

## HEALING Milestones and DERAILERS

You may find the concepts of HEALING Milestones and DERAILERS helpful as you are going through your grief journey:

### HEALING Milestones

- H** Honour your loved one and yourself: discover your own interests and values
- E** Ease emotional pain: Open yourself to emotions – both painful and pleasant ones: trust that you can deal with emotional pain: it doesn't control you
- A** Accept grief and let it find a place in your life
- L** Learn to live with reminders of your loss
- I** Integrate memorized of your loved one; let them enrich your life, and help you learn and grow
- N** Narrate stories of the death for yourself; share them with others
- G** Gather others around you; connect with your community, let people in and let them support you

Bereaved individuals are encouraged to visit these milestones in any order, in a way that feels right to them. Moving naturally between these milestones may allow the healing process to unfold.

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Look out for  
your colleagues

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## DERAILERS

- D** Doubt that you did enough for the person who dies
- E** Embracing ideas about grief that make you want to change it or control it
- R** Repeatedly imagining scenarios where the death didn't happen or happened differently, "if only" thinking
- A** Anger and bitterness you can't resolve or let go of
- I** Insistent belief that this death was unfair or wrong or shouldn't have happened
- L** Lack of faith in the possibility of adapting to the loss and having a promising future
- E** Excessive avoidance of reminders of the loss
- R** Rejecting support from others, unable to let others help, feeling hurt and alone
- S** Survivor guilt that is stopping you from experiencing joy and satisfaction

When noticing the above DERAILERS, practice self-compassion. Then, take some time to consider how to gently put these aside, in order to value your inner peace, allow for healing and Honour your relationship with the deceased.

## Managing Difficult Times

It may also be helpful to plan ahead to manage difficult times. For example, special occasions and anniversaries involving a deceased loved one may bring up painful emotions. There is no right way to manage difficult times, however some of the suggestions below may aid in helping you to feel more prepared.

- 1. Anticipate and plan for difficult times:** anticipating when this may happen and how you will want to spend this time
- 2. Honour continuing bonds to the person who died:** taking time to remember their achievements and admired traits, acknowledging their passing, and/or visiting them at their resting place
- 3. Find pleasurable activities:** engaging in activities you truly enjoy, even if only for a few minutes, either in solitude or with friends/family
- 4. Take care of yourself and let others take care of you:** reach out to people you trust, give yourself permission to feel your emotions, and accept help from friends and family.

## Conclusion

Whilst grief is a painful experience and difficult to all those involved, grief can be better understood not only to support ourselves, but also others who are grieving.

It is important to remember to allow yourself to grieve at your own pace, but to reach out to others or seek professional support if needed.

## Make yourself the priority

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