

Grief, Bereavement, & Mourning

Bereavement is the state of having lost a significant other to death.

Grief is the personal response to the loss.

Mourning is the public expression of that loss.

What is “Normal” Grief?

Grief reactions vary depending on who we are, who we lost, our relationship with that person, the circumstances around their passing, and how much their loss affects our day-to-day functioning. Different people may express grief differently and you may even have different grief responses between one loss and another.

Reactions to grief and loss include not just emotional symptoms, but also behavioral and physical symptoms. These reactions can often change over time. All are normal for a short period of time.

Emotional	Behavioral	Physical
Shock, denial, numbness	Crying unexpectedly	Exhaustion/Fatigue
Sadness, anxiety, guilt, fear	Sleep changes (increase or decrease)	Decreased energy
Anger (at others or God), Irritability, frustration	Not eating/Weight changes	Memory problems
	Withdrawing from others	Stomach and intestinal upset
	Restlessness, difficulty concentrating, trouble making decisions	Pain and headaches

Symptoms that are not normal and may signal the need to talk to a professional include: Use of drugs, alcohol, violence, and thoughts of killing oneself.

The duration of grief varies from person to person. Current research shows that the average recovery time is 18 to 24 months. Also, grief reactions can be stronger around anniversary or other significant dates, such as the anniversary of the person’s death, birthdays, and holidays.

The Stages of Grief

Grief therapists often describe stages of grief outlined by the research of Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. These stages do not always go in order. You may move back and forth among some of the stages and may even “skip” some of them. These stages are meant as a guide to help you understand your reactions and those of others who are grieving.

- **Denial:** Denial (not acknowledging the loss) can help contain the shock of loss. Denial can act as a “safety mechanism” to block out grief until we are ready to handle it.
- **Sadness and depression:** Deep, intense grief and mourning appear during this stage. When the full understanding of our loss comes, it can seem overwhelming. During this stage, you may cry often and unexpectedly. You may not want to be around people or to do things that you normally enjoy. During this stage, it is best to remain as active as possible and to seek supportive people who will allow you to say what you need to or to cry when you need to. It is important to allow yourself to work through your full range and experience of emotions.
- **Anger:** Rage and anger can be intense toward the person who died, toward friends and relatives, and even toward God. It is important to have an outlet to release anger through activities such as exercise, hobbies, or through therapy. Guilt, shame, and blame are feelings that need to be addressed, especially if it is toward you.
- **Acceptance:** This stage includes “coming to terms” with the loss. It does not mean that you have found the answers to your questions or that you stop thinking about the person who is gone. It does signify a reinvestment in life and a willingness to readjust to your new circumstances while carrying the memory of your loved one with you.

How to Help Yourself

1. Give yourself time to grieve. It is normal and important to express your grief and to work through the concerns that arise for you at this time. “Stuffing” your feelings may not be helpful and may delay or prolong your grief.
2. Find supportive people to reach out to during your grief. This is the time when the support of others may be the most helpful. Don’t be afraid to tell them how they can best help, even if it means just listening. It is often very helpful to talk about your loss with people who will allow you to express your emotions.
3. Take care of your health. Often after a loss, we stop doing the things we need to for health care, such as exercising, eating correctly, keeping Dr. appointments, or taking prescribed medications. If you are on a health care regimen, it is important to continue to adhere to your treatment.
4. Postpone major life changes. Give yourself time to adjust to your loss before making plans to change jobs, move or sell your home, remarry, etc. Grief can sometimes cloud your judgment and ability to make decisions.

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5. Consider keeping a journal. It is often helpful to write or tell the story of your loss and what it means to you as a way to work through your feelings.
6. Participate in activities. Staying active through exercise, enjoyable activities, outings with supportive others, or even starting new hobbies can help us get through tough times while providing opportunities for constructive development and use of energy.
7. Find a way to memorialize your loved one. Planting a tree or garden in the name of your loved one, dedicating a work to their memory, contributing to a charity in their name, and other such activities can be helpful.
8. Consider joining grief-support groups or contacting a grief counselor for additional support and help.

Remember that depressive symptoms (feeling sad) are a fundamental part of normal bereavement. Staying active and finding support from others can help you to work through the grief process.

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