

What is Grief?

What is grief?

The definition of grief includes: emotions and sensations that accompany the loss of someone or something dear to you. The English word comes from the Old French *greve*, meaning a heavy burden. This makes sense when you consider that grief often weighs you down with sorrow and other emotions that can have both psychological and physical consequences.

When someone close to you dies, you don't just lose that person on the physical level, you also face the loss of what might have been. Your pain can involve missing that person's presence; sleeping in a bed that's half empty, craving a scent or an embrace. But knowing that your loved one will miss all of the milestone in your life often lasts longer than the pain of the physical absence. This may include the children that were never born, the trips not taken, colleges not attended, weddings not danced at – every life marker can be a reminder and an occasion for renewed grief.

- The **emotional** response we have when someone dies. Shock, anger, sadness, yearning, guilt, relief are some of the types of grief emotions.
- The **physical** response we have when someone dies. Fatigue, headache, stomach problems, shaky, lack of focus, memory loss, sleeping disorders, eating disorders. Intense symptoms lessen over time.
- **Unique** to each person-no two people react the same. Even within the same family.
- **Our natural connection** to the one we loved and not an illness to be cured or dismissed. We have a right to grieve and memorialize those we love through rituals of our choosing- looking at photos, visiting the cemetery,

keeping special objects, celebrating their birthday, etc.

- **Long-lasting.** We never “get over” the death of someone we loved. We learn over the years to create a new normal, a life without them. This can't be rushed and ***shouldn't be judged by others***. The second year of grief may be surprisingly harder than the first.
- **Challenging-** grief can make it hard to focus, sleep, or have enough energy to get through the day.
- **Affects our mental health.** Can cause temporary anxiety or depression or just a general lack of joy.
- **Requires coping skills-** talking, crying, or journaling. Needs a healthy release such as physical activity, music, being with pets or friends. Different strategies work for different people.
- **Causes stress** that can increase alcohol and drug abuse or increase risk of self-harm. Counseling or peer support groups can help greatly and even lessen the severity of our grief.
- **Will get easier** with time and the love and support of those we trust to share our grief with. Will happen to each and every human during their lifetime and causes us to appreciate life even more.

How to respond to a particular loss

How the person died

Your response to an unanticipated death – a sudden heart attack, an accident, and act of violence – may be very different from the grief you feel when someone you love dies after a long illness. In the latter case, you may experience anticipatory grief, which occurs before the person's death.

You're just as devastated when the death happens, but because you started grieving earlier, you may be able to recover sooner.

Your relationship with the person

The closeness of the relationship – spouse, parent, sibling, and child – plays a role, of course. In the case of a blood relative, another factor is whether the person was a daily or regular presence in your life. Then there's the psychological nature of the relationships; was it smooth or rocky? If you had unfinished emotional business with the person you lost, if your last interaction was angry or otherwise fraught, that can intensify your experience of grief.

Your personality and coping style

If you're a normally resilient person, you may feel just as much pain over a loss as someone whose normal state is depressive or emotionally vulnerable, but you may find it easier to recover your equilibrium and to enjoy life again. People who have trouble coping with the setbacks of daily life will have a more difficult time recovering from a serious personal loss.

Your life experience

What you've learned about loss from other people and from your own experience can inform how you handle the loss of someone you love.

Support from others

It's essential that you have people in your life who will help sustain you emotionally as you grieve. It's also important that your friends and family take your loss as seriously as you do. If you lose a cousin or friend who was more like a sibling, your grief shouldn't be dismissed as less important than that of an immediate relative. Many people downplay miscarriage, even if, to the parents, it represents the death of a baby. Nor does it matter how old the person was who died, or how sick. You lost someone you love, it hurts, and you need the support of people who care about you.