

Introduction

Bereavement is the period of grief and mourning after a death. During bereavement, you may experience grief as a mental, physical, social or emotional reaction. The amount of time that bereavement lasts can depend on several factors.

This reference summary reviews bereavement, focusing specifically on the mental and physical reactions it causes.



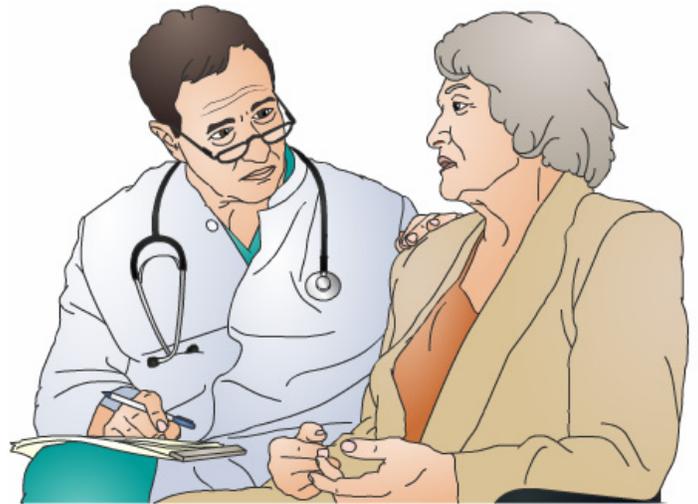
Bereavement

Bereavement is the period of grief and mourning after a death. People who are grieving are sometimes called bereaved.

Grief is the normal process of reacting to the loss of a loved one. Grief may include:

- Feeling emotionally numb.
- Feeling unable to believe the loss happened.
- Feeling anxiety from being separated from the loved one.
- Mourning and depression.
- A feeling of acceptance.

Grief is sometimes described as a process that has stages. Experts have described different types and numbers of stages that people go through as they cope with loss. At this time, there is not enough information to prove that one of these theories is more correct than the others.



This document is for informational purposes and is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a doctor or healthcare professional or a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. Like any printed material, it may become out of date over time. It is important that you rely on the advice of a doctor or a healthcare professional for your specific condition.

Although many bereaved people have similar responses, there is no typical grief response. The grief process is personal. How a person responds to the death of a loved one depends on many things.

There are many things that can affect the grief process. They include:

- The personality of the person who is grieving.
- The relationship with the person who died.
- The amount of pain or suffering the loved one experienced before death.

Some other things that can affect the grief process include:

- The grieving person's coping skills and mental health history.
- The amount of support the grieving person has.
- The grieving person's cultural and religious background.
- The grieving person's social and financial position.



There are several types of grief. The next few sections discuss several different types of grief a bereaved person may experience.

Normal Grief

Normal or common grief begins soon after a loss and symptoms go away over time.

Normal grief reactions include:

- Emotional numbness, shock, disbelief or denial. These emotions are often felt right after the death, especially if the death was not expected.
- Anxiety over being separated from the loved one. The bereaved may wish to bring the person back and become lost in thoughts of the deceased. Images of death may happen often in the person's everyday thoughts.



This document is for informational purposes and is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a doctor or healthcare professional or a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. Like any printed material, it may become out of date over time. It is important that you rely on the advice of a doctor or a healthcare professional for your specific condition.

- Distress that leads to crying, sighing, having dreams, illusions or hallucinations of the deceased.
- Anger.

Other normal grief reactions include:

- Periods of sadness.
- Loss of sleep.
- Loss of appetite.
- Extreme tiredness.
- Guilt.
- Loss of interest in day-to-day living.



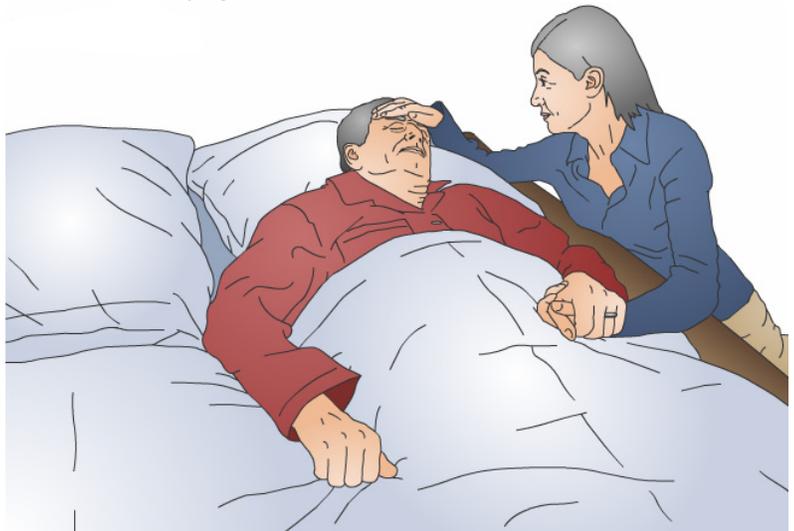
Normal grief symptoms happen less often and will feel less severe as time passes. Recovery does not happen in a set period of time. For most bereaved people having normal grief, symptoms lessen between 6 months and 2 years after the loss.

People who experience normal grief eventually move toward accepting the loss. They become able to continue normal day-to-day life, even though it is hard to do.

Anticipatory Grief

Anticipatory grief is the type of grief that happens before an expected death. It may be felt by the families of people who are dying and by the person dying. Like grief that happens after the death of a loved one, anticipatory grief involves mental, emotional, cultural and social responses. It can be a time to take care of unfinished business with the dying person, such as saying I love you or I forgive you.

Anticipatory grief helps family members emotionally prepare for the loss. But for the patient who is dying, anticipatory grief may be too much to handle and may cause him or her to withdraw from others.



This document is for informational purposes and is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a doctor or healthcare professional or a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. Like any printed material, it may become out of date over time. It is important that you rely on the advice of a doctor or a healthcare professional for your specific condition.

Symptoms of anticipatory grief include the following:

- Depression.
- Feeling a greater than usual concern for the dying person.
- Imagining what the loved one's death will be like.
- Getting ready emotionally for what will happen after the death.

Some people will not experience anticipatory grief, even when they are close to the person who is dying. When a person does experience anticipatory grief, it does not decrease the grief felt after the person dies.

Complicated Grief

While there is no right or wrong way to grieve, some studies have shown that there are patterns of grief that are different from the most common. This type of grief is known as complicated grief. A person with complicated grief may continue to show the symptoms of normal grief for a much longer time than usual.

A lack of social support may make it more difficult to cope with a loss. Social support includes a person's family, friends, neighbors, and community members who can give psychological, physical and financial help.

People who are very dependent on the loved one, such as a spouse, and people who deal with sorrow by thinking about it all the time are more likely to experience complicated grief.

Your gender affects the amount of grief you feel. In general, men seem to have worse depression and more health problems than women do after the loss. Some researchers think this may be because men have less social support after a loss.

Younger bereaved people tend to have more grief symptoms after a loss than older bereaved people do. But they may recover more quickly because they have more resources and social support.



This document is for informational purposes and is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a doctor or healthcare professional or a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. Like any printed material, it may become out of date over time. It is important that you rely on the advice of a doctor or a healthcare professional for your specific condition.

Bereaved people with low self-esteem or a sense that life cannot be controlled are more likely to have complicated grief after an unexpected loss.

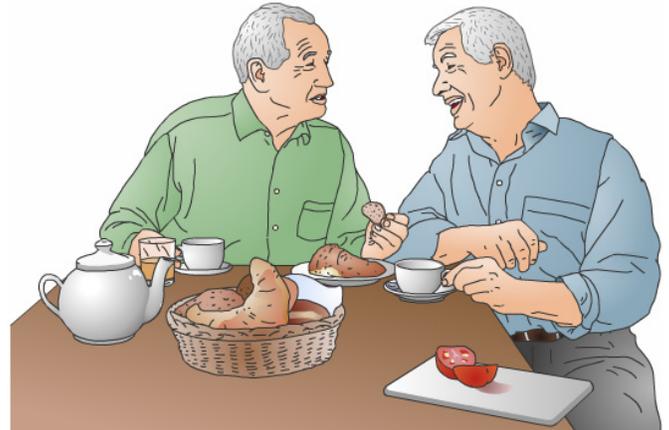
Treatment

Most bereaved people work through grief and recover within the first 6 months to 2 years. The most effective way to overcome grief is to receive social support. For people who have serious grief reactions or symptoms of distress, treatment may be helpful.

Complicated grief treatment, or CGT, includes discussion, listening and counseling.

Cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT, helps the bereaved learn skills that change attitudes and behaviors. This is done by replacing negative thoughts and changing the way certain behaviors are rewarded.

Medications may also be used to treat depression that happens with grief in some cases. But some health care professionals think depression is a normal part of grief and doesn't need to be treated.



Children and Grief

Children do not react to loss in the same ways as adults. The following section explains some of the ways children's grief is different.

Children may seem to show grief only once in a while and for a short period of time. A grieving child may be sad one minute and playful the next. This may be because a child is not able to feel strong emotions for long periods of time. Often families think the child doesn't really understand the loss or has gotten over it quickly. Usually, neither is true. Children's minds protect them from what is too much for them to handle emotionally.



This document is for informational purposes and is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a doctor or healthcare professional or a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. Like any printed material, it may become out of date over time. It is important that you rely on the advice of a doctor or a healthcare professional for your specific condition.

Grieving adults may withdraw and not talk to other people about the loss. But children often talk to the people around them, even strangers. This helps children see how other people react, which gives them clues for how they should respond to the loss.

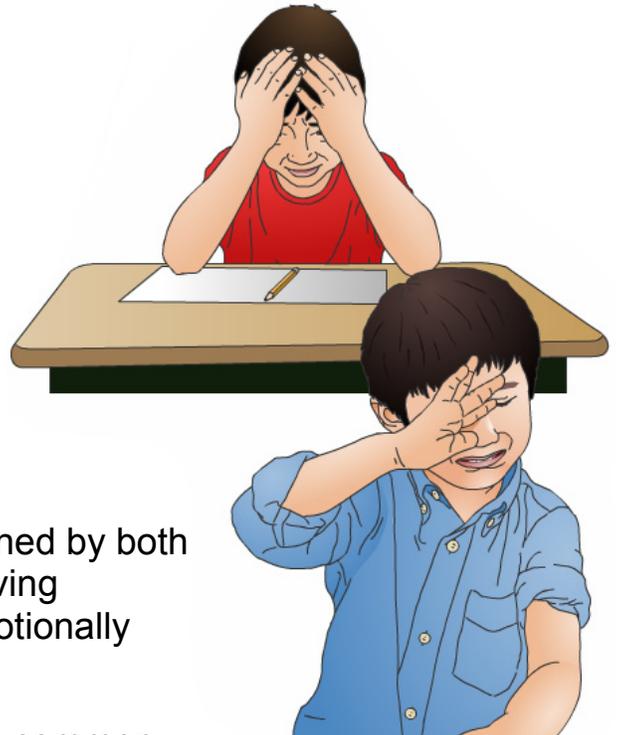
Children may ask confusing questions. For example, a child may ask, "I know grandpa died. But when will he come home?" This is their way of testing reality and making sure the story of the death has not changed.



Grieving children may:

- Become afraid of school.
- Have learning problems.
- Show antisocial or aggressive behavior.
- Withdraw from others.
- Become overly attached and clingy.

Children who are grieving may also become overly worried about their own health. They may complain of imaginary symptoms. Boys often become more aggressive and destructive instead of showing their sadness openly. Acting out in school is one example of this behavior.



When one parent dies, children may feel abandoned by both the deceased parent and the living parent. The living parent's grief may make him or her unable to emotionally support the child.

Most children who have lost someone have three common worries about death:

1. Did I make the death happen?
2. Is it going to happen to me?
3. Who is going to take care of me?

Talking honestly about the death and including the grieving child in rituals, such as the wake or funeral, may help. Talking about death helps children learn to cope with loss. When talking about death with children, describe it simply. Answer questions in language the child can understand.

Bereavement is a process that continues over years in children. Feelings of loss may happen again and again as the child gets older. This is common at important times, such as going to camp, graduating from school, getting married or having children.

End of Grief

At times it may feel like your grief will last forever. But for most people there comes a time when the grief will pass. If you recently experienced a death or other loss, feelings of grief are part of a normal reaction. But if these feelings persist without relief, ask for help.

Contact a health care provider if you feel that you are overwhelmed with grief and are not receiving any social support.

Summary

Bereavement is the period of grief and mourning after a death. During bereavement, you may experience grief as a mental, physical, social or emotional reaction.

Grief is the normal process of reacting to the loss of a loved one. Grief may include:

- Feeling emotionally numb.
- Feeling unable to believe the loss happened.
- Feeling anxiety from being separated from the loved one.
- Mourning and depression.
- A feeling of acceptance.

Normal grief symptoms happen less often and will feel less severe as time passes. Recovery does not happen in a set period of time. For most bereaved people having normal grief, symptoms lessen between 6 months and 2 years after the loss.



This document is for informational purposes and is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a doctor or healthcare professional or a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. Like any printed material, it may become out of date over time. It is important that you rely on the advice of a doctor or a healthcare professional for your specific condition.

Anticipatory grief is the type of grief that happens before an expected death. It may be felt by the families of people who are dying and by the person dying.

While there is no right or wrong way to grieve, some studies have shown that there are patterns of grief that are different from the most common. This type of grief is known as complicated grief. A person with complicated grief may continue to show the symptoms of normal grief for a much longer time than normal.

Most bereaved people work through grief and recover within the first 6 months to 2 years. The most effective way to overcome grief is to receive social support.

Children do not react to loss in the same ways as adults. Children may seem to show grief only once in a while and for a short period of time. This may be because a child is not able to feel strong emotions for long periods of time.

If you recently experienced a death or other loss, feelings of grief are part of a normal reaction. But if these feelings persist without relief, ask for help. Contact a health care provider if you feel that you are overwhelmed with grief and are not receiving any social support.



This document is for informational purposes and is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a doctor or healthcare professional or a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. Like any printed material, it may become out of date over time. It is important that you rely on the advice of a doctor or a healthcare professional for your specific condition.