



# Understanding Grief

Grief is a natural response to a loss, not a mental health problem. No two people grieve alike, and individuals often have unique grief reactions to different types of losses. Factors such as the psychological health of an individual prior to the loss and an individual's attachment history can influence the length and nature of the grief process. Despite the uniqueness of the grief process, there is strong evidence that grief has a measurable impact on the well-being of the griever. As one poet notes, grief 'tears a big hole in our hearts.'

## Background

Grief is a word used to describe the reactions we experience following a loss. If the loss is a death, the word bereavement is often used. Grief reactions may be psychological, social, physical, or behavioral.<sup>1</sup> Grieving is a process—a process that involves many changes over time.

One of the first steps in working through grief is to recognize grief when we are experiencing it. While grief may be obvious in the aftermath of the death of a spouse or a pet, sometimes losses are more subtle, such as loss due to aging, miscarriage, moving, health issues, loss of a goal, relationship loss, job loss, loss in the aftermath or being robbed, or loss of a sense of purpose.

Though we each have our own unique responses to loss, there are some common reactions (see figure).<sup>2</sup> While sadness may be a predominant emotion associated with grief, many other manifestations of grief such as disorganization, changes in sleep patterns, and hallucinations are often present within weeks of the loss. These types of responses are normal but can be very distressing.

The length of time we can expect to experience symptoms of grief to last varies, but for losses related to attached relationships the time frame may be longer than society recognizes, leaving us alone and isolated in our grief.

## Examples of Normal Grief Responses

### Sample of **PHYSICAL** Grief Responses

- Tight chest
- Weak muscles
- Lack of energy
- Dry mouth
- A sense of depersonalization
- Oversensitivity to noise

### Sample of **EMOTIONAL** Grief Responses

- Numbness
- Sadness
- Anger
- Blame
- Guilt
- Loneliness

### Sample of **BEHAVIORAL** Grief Responses

- Sleeping disturbances
- Eating disturbances
- Absentminded
- Social withdrawal
- Restlessness/hyperactivity

### Sample of **COGNITIVE** Grief Responses

- Disbelief
- Confusion
- Preoccupation
- Sense of Presence
- Hallucinations

<sup>1</sup> Rando, T. A. (1993). Treatment of complicated mourning. Research Press.

<sup>2</sup> Worden, J. W. (2018). *Grief counseling and grief therapy: A handbook for the mental health practitioner*. Springer Publishing Company

# Self-Help and Professional Help

Though professional help shortens the grieving process, professional intervention is not necessary for so-called 'normal' grief. Many individuals heal their grief by engaging in self-help strategies such as:

- Careful attention to nutrition and exercise
- Reading books and online materials about the grief process
- Ritualizing the loss through art and writing
- Talking to friends, family, or religious leaders
- Engaging in culture-based death traditions
- Joining an online or face-to-face support group
- Engaging in prayer, drum circles, dancing, etc.
- Taking care of a pet
- Attending to wholeness as reflected in the traditional medicine wheel
- Use of traditional herbs
- Engaging in ceremonies, such as the sweat lodge ceremony
- Engaging in online memorials



As important as engaging in positive self-help strategies is avoiding self-destructive coping mechanisms. Self-destructive attempts at coping could include excessive use of alcohol and other drugs, developing other addictions such as gambling or shopping, and avoiding coming to terms with the reality of the loss by hyperactivity.

**There are many ways to access professional assistance with the grief process, including:**

- Ask your primary care physician to call in an integrated care clinician during your medical appointment
- Seek face-to-face or online counseling
- Following the proper protocols, seek traditional healing
- Join an internet-based grief group, led by counselors
- Join a psychoeducational grief group
- In extreme circumstances, prescription drugs may be temporarily utilized for coping with guidance from a primary care physician

Professional help is necessary when an individual experiences complicated bereavement, defined as a failure to work through the processes of grief in an appropriate amount of time. In other words, complicated bereavement is when we get stuck in the grief process. Individuals who feel they may be suffering from complicated bereavement should see their physician or a behavioral health provider for assistance.