

Grief explained

Grief is our response to loss, particularly the death of a loved one. Grief can affect our thoughts, feelings, behaviours and beliefs, and our relationships with others. Many people experience feelings of sadness and anxiety. The experience of grief can sometimes feel wave-like. A person may feel that their grief is behind them, but then be surprised when their grief suddenly comes back.

These sudden temporary upsurges in grief can be particularly profound when there is an anniversary of the death (such as the date of the death or funeral) or when memories are triggered (for example, by a piece of music or a particular smell). It is important to recognise that grief is a normal experience and that the process of grieving does require experiencing the pain of the loss.

Grief is a process and not an event. Most people will continue to grieve in subtle ways for the rest of their lives.

Everyone's experience of grief is unique

There are many factors that affect the experience of grief, including:

- Age of the person who is grieving – for example, child or adult
- The type of relationship with the deceased – for example, spouse, parent or friend
- The nature of the relationship with the deceased – for example, close and loving, or remote and troubled
- The way the deceased died – for example, long illness, sudden death or suicide
- The grieving person's religious or spiritual beliefs
- Cultural practices – for example, the ways in which the grieving person's culture expresses grief
- Availability of support from family and friends
- Associated stresses – for example, financial difficulties, job loss or suddenly needing to develop skills as a single parent.

Different grieving styles

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Generally, there are two broad styles of grieving. Most people use a combination of both:

- **The intuitive approach** – people may seek out social support and tend to focus on the emotional aspects of their loss. Their primary focus is on managing their feelings.
- **The instrumental approach** – people tend to focus more on the cognitive (thinking) aspects of the loss. They may grieve through activity and problem solving. This style tends to be more solitary and private, with the primary focus on managing the thoughts that arise.

Children and teenagers

Children and teenagers typically use different coping strategies to those used by adults when dealing with their loss experience, including:

- **Child** – looks to the adults around them to learn how to respond to this experience. A child needs timely, clear and direct information. They should also be allowed to ask questions. Participation in the funeral and opportunities to view the body are important rituals that the child should be encouraged and supported to participate in.
- **Teenager** – their way of coping sometimes creates tension with other adults; for example, they may play music and spend more time with their friends. The typical adolescent is dealing with the normal issues of independence and separation from parents, and these developmental tasks can interfere with their capacity to receive support from the adults around them in dealing with their grief.

Grief and physical illness

Research shows there are clear links between the experience of grief and ill health. Grief often leads to reduced immune system function. Health impacts can range from colds, influenza, anxiety, depression and sleeping difficulties, through to suicide and increased risk of various forms of cancer.

Philosophical and spiritual questions

Grief can raise important philosophical and spiritual questions and may prompt us to ponder our faith and the meaning of life. Our experience of loss may destroy many of the assumptions that we have held about the world, such as 'the world is a safe place', 'the old die before the young' or 'bad things don't happen to good people'. These beliefs are often shattered in the wake of a profound experience of loss.

The experience for many grieving people has been described as 're-learning the world'. Many people also discover a deepening of their spiritual beliefs and can identify how they have grown as a result of their grief experience.

Professional help

It is important not to try to 'speed up' the grief process. Coming to terms with a significant bereavement takes, in most cases, months and years rather than days or weeks. Most people simply require the loving supportive presence of others, permission to talk about the deceased and encouragement to use their own coping strategies in order to deal with their bereavement.

If you feel you need professional help, don't hesitate to contact your doctor or the Centre for Grief Education for information and referral.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- A trained counsellor
- Nurse-on-Call Tel. 1300 606 024 – for expert health information and advice 24 hours, 7 days
- Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement - Bereavement Information and Referral Service Tel. 1300 664 786
- Kids Help Line Tel. 1800 551 800 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- Lifeline Tel. 131 114
- Mensline Tel. 1300 78 9978
- Parentline Tel. 13 22 89

Things to remember

- Grief is a process and not an event – most people will continue to grieve in subtle ways for the rest of their lives.
- Children and teenagers typically use different coping strategies to those used by adults when dealing with their loss experience.
- Grief often leads to a reduction of the immune system function.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

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