

Grief and Grieving: An Introduction

What is grief?

Grief is a normal process that helps people cope and heal. It inevitably follows an event or experience in which someone or something we love is no longer in our lives. Often, it is a strong emotion and may feel overwhelming.

What is anticipatory grief?

Sometimes people with a life threatening illness and their family members begin to grieve about a death that will happen in the future. This is called anticipatory grief. People with anticipatory grief experience symptoms that are similar to those felt during grief after a death.

The amount of anticipatory grief a person feels does not make the grief after a death last a different amount of time. Some people do not feel symptoms of anticipatory grief at all.

“Her doctor told me that her prognosis was poor. It was the first time that I realized that she was probably going to die. That enabled me to really change my whole attitude and my outlook on life, and know that we weren’t going to have more time — another 40 years together. So we were able to really squeeze all that living into the year that she had left. It was wonderful. And when she died, I knew that she loved me. And she knew that I loved her. There were no regrets, so it can change the way you live.”

Does everyone grieve the same way?

No, people do not grieve the same way. Just as people are unique, so is the way we experience grief.

At first, you may feel confused or shocked. This means that even when a death is expected, you may still feel like you can’t believe it has happened.

“Even though we had 11 months of knowing, when it actually happened, you just aren’t prepared for how you feel. You think you’re prepared, but you’re just not.”

Generally people experience five stages of grief. These stages can happen in any order, and you may move in and out of stages several times. Some stages may last longer than others.

The stages are:

Denial

If you're in denial, you pretend the death hasn't happened. You may try to avoid others who remind you of your loved one.

Anger

During this stage of grief, you may blame yourself or others for what has happened. You might even blame your loved one who died.

“I have another three siblings. I was angry at them. I wondered, ‘How can they go on?’ I just thought they forgot my father. Actually, they did not. They loved him as much as I do. I was just mad at them.”

Bargaining

During this stage, you may try to make a deal with yourself or with your God or a higher power. Bargaining may deceive you into feeling like you have control over your loss or your grief. It may be a way for you to hide from the pain.

Despair

Despair means you feel overwhelmed by pain and sorrow. It may be hard to stop crying. It may be easy to lose your spiritual faith or trust in others.

Acceptance

This is the stage where you begin to cope with the feelings of grief. You start getting used to living in a world without the person who died, feel more confident about how your life has changed, and learn to integrate that change into your daily life.

“My mom and dad, they had little education. They raised five kids, and my daddy worked hard. They had a hard life. So knowing that they're at peace now — they have more peace than ever — that's a comfort to me.”

Grief allows people to recognize the importance of a death and to begin the process of moving forward. The grief process is often called grief work because it is a challenge, and you have to “work” through it. You may want to avoid this process, thinking that it serves no purpose; however, research has shown that the pain is more likely to remain when people avoid their emotions. This avoidance can lead to unresolved grief, which is associated with chronic depression.

“My sister is angry. To this day, she has not even begun the grief process. She is still hanging on to that anger because if she's still angry, she doesn't have to feel the loss because she can't handle it yet. She's still very angry — She has a lot of resentment.”

Grieving Families Share

“You will get through it.”

“It’s okay to cry. I don’t know why they say, ‘Don’t cry.’ But it’s okay to cry.”

“Appreciate every moment that you have with your loved one. Forgive yourself and others. And give your grief all the time you need. ”

“I don’t think there is enough time. I think if they linger for 20 years, or if they go within 20 minutes, there’s not enough time to get ready.”

“We still grieve with the heart of a child. You still grieve at 30, at 40, at 52 with the heart of a child.”

“There’s no time line. You don’t have to go through it according to anybody’s time line. And you don’t have to go through it at the predicted stages in the order in which they are written in ‘the book.’”

“There really is no way, no perfect way to grieve. Do something as soon as you possibly can. Stay active. Stay involved as soon as you’re able.”

“Give yourself permission to go at your own pace.”

Additional Resources

MD Anderson offers quiet places for families visiting patients, such as the Meditation Room in the Main Building, Floor 4, near Elevator E, Room G4.3024.

Pick up a free copy of the MD Anderson booklet “Coping with Grief” at The Learning Center:

Law Learning Center

Main Building, Floor 4, near Elevator A, Room R4.1100
Monday – Friday, 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.

Levit Learning Center

Mays Clinic, Floor 2, near The Tree Sculpture, Room ACB2.1120
Monday – Friday, 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.

Holden Foundation Learning Center

Jesse H. Jones Rotary House International, Floor 1
Monday – Friday, 7 a.m. – 8:30 p.m.
Saturday, 10 a.m. – 4 p.m.
Sunday, 1:30 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.