

Common Grief Reactions

Even though grief is an inherently individual process, there are a number of common reactions to loss that may be a part of our own grief process. These reactions fall into **four different categories**: *thought patterns, physical sensations, emotions, and behaviors*.

Thought Patterns

- **Disbelief.** This is often our first thought upon hearing of a death, especially if the death was sudden.
- **Confusion.** This manifests as having trouble concentrating, being forgetful, experiencing confused thinking.
- **Preoccupation.** We may spend lots of time thinking about the deceased or obsessing about their suffering and dying.
- **Sense of the Deceased's Presence.** This is most likely to happen shortly after the death.
- **Hallucinations.** It is a fairly common and normal symptom of bereavement to see or hear a loved one, usually within a few weeks after the death.

Physical Sensations

- Tightness in the forehead, throat, or chest
- Dry mouth
- Breathlessness
- Nausea and/or a hollow feeling in the stomach
- Hypersensitivity to noise
- Lack of energy, weakness
- Sense of depersonalization

Emotions

- **Shock.** This occurs most often in the case of a sudden death, but may also occur after an expected death.
- **Numbness.** This is commonly experienced early in the grieving process and serves to protect us from being overwhelmed by a flood of feelings.
- **Sadness.** This is the most familiar reaction to grief, and it helps us by evoking sympathy and protective responses in those around us.
- **Irritability and Anger.** This anger comes from two sources. First, we feel frustrated that we couldn't prevent the death. Second, it is a normal regressive experience to feel anger at the person that "abandoned" us. These feelings need to be acknowledged and eventually accepted as being directed at the deceased. It is very common to displace anger onto another target, such as paramedics or other health care personnel. If anger is turned inward toward ourselves, it may develop into suicidal behavior.
- **Guilt.** Guilt is a very common symptom of bereavement, particularly in the case of a suicide. It most often is irrational and will lessen with reality testing.
- **Anxiety.** Our way of looking at the world may have been shattered by our loss. This can range from a light sense of insecurity to a strong panic attack. The sources for this anxiety are the fear that we won't be able to take care of ourselves on our own and a heightened sense of our own mortality.
- **Loneliness.** This is particularly a problem for surviving spouses or in other close day-to-day relationships. It may be very intense if we had an extremely close or conflictual relationship.
- **Fatigue.** Grief is emotionally exhausting. This fatigue can be surprising and distressing to an active person.

- **Helplessness.** The stress of bereavement is heightened by the fact that there is nothing we can do to reverse the death.
- **Yearning.** Missing the deceased is a normal response to loss. When it diminishes, it may be a sign that mourning is coming to an end.
- **Emancipation.** This is a positive feeling that may come after a death, particularly in a difficult or highly conflicted relationship.
- **Relief.** Many people feel relief after the death of a loved one, particularly if the loved one suffered during a lengthy illness. Relief is often accompanied by a sense of guilt.

Behaviors

- **Sleep Disturbances.** These are very common. They may sometimes require medical intervention, but in normal grief they usually correct themselves. They can sometimes symbolize various fears, such as the fear of dreaming, the fear of being in bed alone, and the fear of not awakening.
- **Appetite Disturbances.** Loss of appetite is more common than increased appetite, but both are very common.
- **Absent-Minded Behavior.** This can be dangerous if, for example, we are not paying attention while crossing the street or driving.
- **Social Withdrawal.** This is usually short-lived and corrects itself. It can also include a loss of interest in the outside world, such as giving up TV and newspapers.
- **Dreams of the Deceased.** Both dreams and nightmares are very common and can give clues as to our progress in our course of mourning.
- **Avoiding Reminders of the Deceased.** We may avoid places or things that trigger painful feelings of grief. When we get rid of belongings right away, it can lead to complicated bereavement.
- **Visiting Places or Carrying Objects that Remind Us of the Deceased.** Often we have an underlying fear of losing memories of the deceased.
- **Crying.** There is potential healing value in crying, because our tears release mood altering chemicals.
- **Searching or Calling Out for the Deceased.**
- **Restless Overactivity.**

"Common Grief Reactions." *Crisis Support Services of Alameda County*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Jan. 2015. <http://www.crisissupport.org/grief/common_reactions>.