

Grief and Loss

Overview of the grieving process:

Grief is a natural human response to the loss of a loved one. It can manifest itself in many ways. Grief moves in and out of stages from disbelief and denial, to anger and guilt, to finding a source of comfort, to eventually adjusting to the loss.

It is normal for both the dying person and the survivors to experience grief. For survivors, the grieving process can take many years and many forms. The challenge of accepting death and dying as the end stage of life is what the grieving process is all about.

What is anticipatory grief vs. sudden loss?

Anticipatory grief - occurs when someone has a prolonged illness, and the patient as well as the family anticipates death. Anticipating the loss of a loved one can be just as painful and stressful as the actual act of losing that person. Anticipatory grief allows the family to prepare for the inevitable death. This can be a time to resolve issues and concerns, seek the support of spiritual leaders, family, and friends, and clarify the loved one's wishes for funeral and burial arrangements and other end-of-life issues.

Sudden loss - is a death that happens unexpectedly and suddenly, such as a fatal accident or heart attack. Such tragedies can leave survivors feeling shocked and confused. Loved ones are often left with many questions, unresolved issues, and a range of emotions, including anger, guilt, and pain. Support from family, friends, and clergy is vital to persons experiencing sudden loss.

What may happen in the case of anticipated death?

Many, although not all, persons facing their own death are willing to discuss issues of death and dying. This can be a time to discuss spiritual issues, resolve family concerns, reflect on a loved one's life and accomplishments, and express gratitude. It also provides an opportunity to put practical matters in order, including the following. Consider:

Can funeral expenses be pre-paid?

Which funeral home would the person prefer to handle arrangements?

Can the person assist with obituary information to make sure it is accurate and complete?

What are the individual's specific funeral wishes?

If a church service is in order, can the person facing death help plan favorite Scripture passages or hymns?

Is cremation or burial preferred?

Has a cemetery plot been purchased?

Does the person wish for memorial contributions to be made to a particular charity or benevolent organization?

Can the person direct others regarding important practical issues, such as wills, bank accounts, lawyer's name, pension plans, retirement funds, and life insurance policies?

What are the symptoms of grief?

For both the person facing death and survivors after the death of a loved one, it is natural to experience many symptoms of grief. These can include:

Physical symptoms:

Lack of energy; fatigue

Headaches and upset stomach

Excessive sleeping or, conversely, overworking and excessive activity

Emotional symptoms:

Memory lapses, distraction, and preoccupation

Irritability

Depression and, conversely, feelings of euphoria

Extreme anger or, conversely, feelings of being resigned to the situation

Spiritual symptoms:

Feelings of being closer to God or, conversely, feelings of anger and outrage at God

Strengthening of faith or, conversely, questioning of faith

What are the different stages of grief?

It is natural for persons who are facing death, as well as those they leave behind, to move through many stages of grief. For survivors, the grieving process can last for several months or for two to three years or more. The stages of grief do not necessarily fall into a set order, and vary greatly from one individual to another. Persons can move in and out of these stages at different times throughout the grieving process. These stages include:

shock

depression, loneliness, and a sense of isolation

physical symptoms

feelings of panic

guilt

anger

inability to return to daily routine

return of feelings of hopefulness

acceptance

If you or a loved one is experiencing a grieving period that seems to last longer than it should, you may want to seek professional counseling to assist you through the process.

Your physician may be a good referral source, or you may want to speak with your spiritual leader (priest, rabbi, minister, etc.) for advice.

When providing support for the bereaved:

There are many things you can do to assist a bereaved person. These include:

sending cards or flowers

preparing food

providing child care

mowing the lawn

contributing to a cause which is meaningful to the family

offering transportation

You may also consider the following when providing for the bereaved:

Be available. Sometimes, grieving persons do not want to talk or listen, nor do they want you to talk or listen. They simply want you to be there for them.

Allow the grieving person the full range of their emotions, including anger and bitterness - which may sometimes be expressed against God.

Be patient and understanding, but not patronizing. Do not claim to know how the other person is feeling. Do not force the person to talk or share feelings if he/she does not want to.

Do not be concerned about mentioning the deceased person's name or sharing a fond memory of the person while in the company of the bereaved. They, too, are thinking about the deceased person, so it is acceptable and natural to bring the name into conversation.

Remember that grieving takes time and is a natural human process. No matter how much you want to "stop the hurt," bereaved persons must endure the grieving process. Allow them and care for them as they move through it.