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Common signs and symptoms of grief

The death of someone important affects people in different ways, grief is unique each time it is experienced however there are some common symptoms and experiences. You may feel strange, not yourself, struggle with decisions, even minor ones. Struggle to concentrate and feel unsettled. Emotions can suddenly surface and take you by surprise, which may be confusing and frightening. Just remember that almost anything that you experience in the early stages of grief is *normal*—including feeling like you're going mad, feeling like you're in a bad dream, or questioning your beliefs, the future, your place and purpose in the world.

Shock and disbelief – Immediately after someone has died, even if the person has been very ill, it can be hard to accept what has happened. You may feel numb, have trouble believing that it has really happened, or even deny the truth. If someone you love has died, you may keep expecting him or her to walk through the door, even though you know he or she is gone. You may 'forget' temporarily and then feel a sense of shock again as you remember the person has died.

Sadness – Profound sadness is probably the most universally experienced symptom of grief. You may have feelings of emptiness, despair, yearning, or deep loneliness. You may also cry a lot or feel emotionally unstable. For many people this can feel very difficult and give rise to feeling overwhelmed and out of control. This feeling can mean you have little motivation and things you normally enjoy give you little pleasure.

Guilt – You may regret or feel guilty about things you did or didn't say or do. You may also feel guilty about certain feelings (e.g. feeling relieved when the person died after a long, difficult illness). After a death, you may even feel guilty for not doing something to prevent the death, even if there was nothing more you could have done. Guilt can be very complex and sometimes hard to make sense of even if it seems irrational to feel guilty the feeling may get in the way of resolving and moving through grief.

Anger – There may be some very valid reasons to feel angry after someone close to you as died. Even if the death was nobody's fault, you may feel angry and resentful. You may be angry with yourself, God, the doctors, or even the person who died for leaving you or what they did or didn't do. You may feel the need to blame someone. Anger sometimes protects us from other difficult emotions initially.

Fear – The death of a significant person in our life, parent, partner, child or even peer, can trigger a host of worries and fears. Feelings of fear can be affected by the type of death the person had. Was the death sudden or expected, due to an accident, illness or even suicide.



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You may feel anxious, helpless, or insecure. Some people have panic attacks for the first time. Fears can surface about your own mortality, facing life without that person, or the responsibilities you may now have to face alone.

Physical symptoms – We often think of grief as a strictly emotional process, but grief often involves physical problems, including fatigue, nausea, lowered immunity, change in appetite causing weight loss or weight gain, aches and pains, and insomnia or excessive sleeping. In fact any kind of stress reaction can occur.

Simple steps to help

Being kind to yourself – people often try to 'carry on as normal', however life is far from normal and allowing yourself some 'time off' every day life can be one way to help.

Things like:-

- Taking time off work – being at work can indicate to others there is no problem and you are functioning at your normal level, which can quickly become overwhelming.
- Rest - getting plenty of rest, even if sleeping is difficult, finding time to take a rest during the day can help.
- Exercise – some light exercise, walking, yoga stretches or swimming can help ease muscle tension and help sleeping.
- Relax - think about the things that helped you rest/relax before. Soak in the bath, country walk or coffee/drink with a friend perhaps.
- Time and space - give yourself some private time and space to grieve out loud – holding in such big emotions is exhausting and very hard to do.
- Nourish - Eat as well as you can even if you don't really feel like eating. A healthy diet is fuel for grieving and will help you feel physically and emotionally better sooner.
- Put yourself first - let others look after their own needs – if you are responsible for children or supporting a grieving parent consider where additional support for you, and them, may come from to ease the load.

There is no set time length for the process of grief it is unique to each person and each loss. There is also no clear sequence for feelings and reactions. Usually the early weeks and months following a death bring the most intense feelings but this is not always so. An untrue perception is that things will get better 'day by day', this can happen, however more usually the pattern is much more uneven. Good and bad days being unpredictable and random for months and sometimes years after the death.

Many more people seek counselling to help when they are grieving. This may be due to our lack of experience of death and grief as many of us are well in to adulthood before someone close to us dies. When it does happen we can feel lost and have no past experience to pull on. It may also be that it is more widely recognised that death and grief is complex and support via counselling can aide the process to a healthy resolution therefore reducing longer term issues.