

# grief and bereavement

## Uncomplicated Grief

Grief and loss are part of life and is experienced by most of us at some point in life. People deal with grief in many different ways, and not necessarily going through a predictable group of 'stages,' although some do.

How people grieve can depend on the circumstances of the loss (e.g., sudden death, long illness, death of a young person) as well as past experiences of loss. There is no time limit on grief - some people get back to their usual routine fairly quickly, others take longer. Some people prefer time alone to grieve, others crave the support and company of others.

Below are just some of the range of experiences which can be part of uncomplicated grief:

- Symptoms of depression or anxiety, such as poor sleep, lowered appetite, low mood, feeling of anxiety - for some people the anxiety will be more obvious, for others the depression.
- A sense of the loss not quite being 'real' at first, or refusal to believe it has occurred
- Feeling disconnected from others, sense of numbness
- Guilt about not initially feeling pain about the loss
- Worries about not grieving 'normally' or 'correctly'
- Mood swings and tearfulness
- Guilt about interactions with the person who has died (e.g. *I should have spent more time with her or I wish we didn't have that argument*)
- Waves of sadness or anger which can be overwhelming and sometimes suddenly triggered by reminders
- Seeking reminders of the person who has died, e.g. being in their home or with their belongings, or perhaps at times even feeling you see or hear the deceased person
- Guilt about gradually getting back to 'normal' life and at times not 'remembering' to feel sad

## Coping with Uncomplicated Grief

Most people going through the pain described above will eventually adjust to the loss and return to normal life, although of course carrying some sadness about the loss. Most people do not require medication or counselling to manage uncomplicated grief, and should simply be



supported to go through their individual grief process. It is important to maintain a healthy diet and some physical activity during this time. Some people may find it helpful to engage in counselling or to attend groups with others who have suffered a recent loss.

## Complicated Grief

Complicated grief is a general term for describing when people adjust poorly to a loss. **This is very difficult to define, as there is no standard which limits what is normal or healthy grief.**



Below are some warning signs which *may* suggest that a person is not coping well with grief and may be at a greater risk of the grieving process taking longer to resolve or being more difficult:

- Pushing away painful feelings or avoiding the grieving process entirely
- Excessive avoidance of talking about or reminders of the person who has died
- Refusal to attend the funeral
- Using distracting tasks to avoid experiencing grief, including tasks associated with planning the funeral
- Abuse of alcohol or other drugs (including prescription)
- Increased physical complaints or illness
- Intense mood swings or isolation which do not resolve within 1-2 months of the loss
- Ongoing neglect of self-care and responsibilities

Again, it is important to emphasise that there are no 'rules for grieving' and that many of the items above may occur as part of uncomplicated grief. However, people who are coping very poorly one month after a loss may continue to cope poorly 1-2 years later, so if these warning signs are present then it is often worthwhile seeking some help early on, to increase the chances of adjusting in the long term.

## Coping with Complicated Grief

Psychological therapy can support people to safely explore feelings of grief and connect with painful feelings and memories, paving the way for resolution. Therapy may also support people to use strategies such as relaxation, engaging in positive activities, and challenging negative thoughts, in order to combat the associated symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Antidepressant medication may also be used to alleviate depression associated with grief, and this can be useful in conjunction with psychological strategies. Tranquilizing medications can interfere with the natural grieving process.

Although early help is recommended, health professionals are able to support people to work through complicated grief even years after the loss.

