



THE EMOTIONS OF GRIEF

Grief is a normal reaction to the death of someone with whom you have a close relationship. It is not exclusively an emotional reaction, and it is important to be aware of how your body, mind, heart, and spirit might respond when you are grieving. Understanding the possible effects of grief can help you determine how to take care of yourself and get the help you need.

COMMON REACTIONS TO GRIEF

The outline below is adapted from: Wheeler-Roy, S., Amyot, B.A. (2004). A field manual: Grief counseling resource guide. Albany, NY: New York State Office of Mental Health. Downloaded from <https://www.omh.ny.gov/omhweb/grief>.

- Physical
 - Loss of appetite, overeating
 - Sleeping disturbances, sleeping a lot, fatigue
 - Digestive problems
 - Headaches, other “aches and pains”
 - Exacerbation of high blood pressure, diabetes, allergies, other illnesses
- Cognitive
 - Trouble concentrating, forgetfulness
 - Difficulty making decisions
 - Being preoccupied by the loss
 - Self-denigration, negative thinking
 - Idealizing the past or the deceased
 - “Magical” thinking (believing one can change things beyond one’s control)
- Emotional
 - Sorrow, sadness (can be severe or intense)
 - Shock, disbelief, numbness
 - Vulnerability, hypersensitivity
 - Blame, guilt
 - Fear, helplessness
 - Hopelessness, despair
 - Loneliness, abandonment, rejection
 - Anger, lack of control
 - Anxiety, irritability
 - Yearning, neediness
- Behavioral
 - Being aggressive, disagreeable
 - Withdrawing, not participating
 - Expressing self-doubt
 - Showing apathy, loss of purposefulness
 - Being reckless, self-destructive
 - Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
 - Being restless, distracted by busyness
 - Seeing or talking to the deceased

COPING WITH THE EMOTIONS OF GRIEF

Below are a few examples of ways to cope with some common emotions that might be helpful:

Shock

- Give yourself permission to feel completely shaken up by what has happened.
- Find ways to step back from activities and people that are putting pressure on you. Say: “I can’t do that right now.” “I can’t be with you right now.”
- Tell people you need time to “catch your breath” and space to “land on your feet.” Insist that they respect your needs.
- Ask for help with activities and tasks that feel overwhelming.
- If feelings of disorientation, disconnectedness, or numbness persist, seek help from a doctor or mental health clinician.

Disbelief

- Share with other bereaved people your stories about what happened to your loved ones and any doubts you have about the circumstances you are trying to understand.
- Unless it increases your distress to do so:
 - Learn about your loved one’s behavior and state of mind in the hours, days, and weeks before he or she died.
 - Learn about addiction and substance use in general, and in prevention and intervention.

Anger

- Anger after a death from substance use can be severe, in part because it might be fueled by other strong emotions,
- If anger is compelling you to act harmfully toward yourself or someone else, immediately step back from any hurtful behavior.
- Try not to judge your anger as a “bad” emotion nor to view yourself as being “wrong” for feeling angry.
- In a safe setting (for example, with a mentor or a trusted friend), share candidly and openly why you’re angry—and what it feels like when you’re angry.
- Or, share about your anger privately at first, writing everything you have to say about it in a single sitting, writing continuously without taking a break until you’ve finished.
- Because anger can be a difficult emotion to deal with, consider seeking help from a mental health counselor or someone knowledgeable about managing anger.

Guilt

- Consider all of the influences and causes that might have contributed to your loved one’s death
- Think about how much power one person actually has over another person’s behavior – and about what every person’s human limitations are.

Relief.

- Realize that feeling relieved and feeling heartbroken can both occur at the same time.
- With trusted people and in safe settings, talk openly about your feelings of relief.
- Give yourself permission not to have to explain yourself or to react to others in any way if you don’t feel safe.