



Coping With Grief

CANCER SOCIETY - BRIEF FACTS

When we lose someone we love, a period of grief usually follows. It is almost impossible for humans to experience loss without feeling some kind of grief.

But grief does not come easily – most of us are afraid to let ourselves feel it. Grief can be painful, confusing and overwhelming. Unfortunately, it is also common for us to have expectations about how we **should** feel when someone dies. This can make grieving even more difficult.

It is important to remember that each person's grief is unique – there is no one kind of grief, and there is certainly no right kind. Yet there are some things about grief that are universal; that is, we all share them. It is here that we find ways to help ourselves, get help from others, recover from our grief, and begin moving on. Grieving is the process of how we accept the loss of a loved one.

Anticipatory Grief

The term **anticipatory grief** refers to grieving that occurs prior to the actual loss. Most deaths associated with cancer occur with some forewarning, and it is during this period of anticipation that family and friends begin to experience the various responses of grief. People often experience feelings of guilt that they are 'looking ahead' to a time without their loved one, but anticipation of the event is not the same as looking forward to it. People who are dying can also experience this anticipatory grief, although in ways somewhat different from those who will survive them.

What Grief Is – What Grief is Not

Because grief has many different faces, often people wonder whether their reaction to the loss of a loved one is normal. In almost every case, the answer is an unqualified **yes** – even if it doesn't feel that way to you.

You may find it comforting to know that most people question how they feel when someone they love dies. They may worry that they are too upset by it, or not upset enough. Many people say grief is like being on an emotional roller coaster. Many different and sometimes surprising feelings, such as anger or regret, can surface. Again, all of this is normal.

If you are going through this yourself, you may find it helpful to hear what others have thought, felt and learned about grief:

Grief can be physical. Many people feel a physical pain. Besides tears, grief can bring a sense of physical emptiness, a loss of appetite, or heaviness, or pain in your chest. It may interfere with your ability to sleep or concentrate, make you forgetful, or give you a sense of

being restless or lost. If any of these physical symptoms appear regularly and do not go away, it is a good idea to check with your physician.

Grief can be confusing. A variety of conflicting emotions arise when someone dies. You may experience intense love, anger and resentment, or guilt about wanting to continue living yourself. You may feel overwhelmed by your feelings, even the smallest ones, but at the same time feel very disconnected from the experience of your loss, or from other people.

Grief can be overwhelming. Being preoccupied with everything about the one you have lost is very common. You may think about this person all the time, dream about him or her, suddenly feel overwhelmed by the pain of the loss, or even feel that he or she is still alive and with you. You may feel regret about things that did or did not happen, and start remembering things about the person you thought you had forgotten.

Grief brings uncertainties. Questioning what you are doing with your life, not being interested in things that usually engage you, and feeling suddenly angry or sullen about others are all normal reactions to loss.

Because so many of us have expectations about grief, it is also important to understand what grief is not. Often, we can be very angry and disappointed in ourselves over what we feel or don't feel.

It is important to remember:

Grief is not an indicator of how much we loved someone we have lost. It is also not a measure of our worth to the loved one as a parent, a spouse or a family member.

Grief is not a problem that has to be solved. Sometimes it is important for us to confront it, but it is not something anyone can go around or get away from. It is a natural process that needs time to take its course. Many people have said that they learned that there is no shortcut through the pain of grief.

Grief is also not an end of the person you have lost. Rather, it is the beginning of the process of healing, and the first step in accepting the pain of separation.

Grief takes time. Just when you think it may be over, your grief can resurface when you hear a favourite song, or see, smell, or touch something that reminds you of the one you have lost. Don't despair – grief takes time, and although it may feel that you will never get past it, you will.



What You Can Do for Yourself and How Others Can Help

Remember that this can be an extremely difficult time for you, and you need to take care of yourself. There are things you can do to help yourself cope with grief; some of them may seem obvious, but they are important to remember.

- Remember that the experience of grief, however difficult it may seem to you, is normal. Don't avoid it or try to make it go away. Everyone needs to grieve. Don't be afraid to reach out and ask for help.
- Don't expect your grief to go away quickly or suddenly. It takes time. Be prepared to have both good and bad days.
- Try to maintain your physical health and postpone things (like major life decisions) until you feel ready to face them. Many people find that mild physical exercise, such as walking, makes them feel better. New hobbies or interest may help you cope with your grief.
- Your own sense of spirituality, no matter what religion or beliefs you have, may offer strength and inspiration during difficult times.
- Supportive counselling in an individual or group setting can provide you with a place in which your grief is understood, accepted and shared.
- Finally, don't be afraid to accept your feels and share them with others, especially family or friends. Many people find that speaking to others, particularly those who have been through similar situations, provides great comfort.

The Cancer Society of New Zealand is a non-profit organisation whose mission is "to minimise the impact of cancer on our community". The Cancer Society's Support & Information Service assists people with cancer and family members through one-to-one counselling, support, educational programmes, such as LIVING WITH CANCER and CANSUPPORT, telephone contact, guidance, information and referrals to appropriate services. The Cancer Society also offers assistance with transport to treatment for those who require it, CANTALK newsletter and a specialist library and information service. There is a specialist nurse for patient information who can guide you - email: info@cancersoc.org.nz

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Wellington Division of the Cancer Society Support & Information

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