

The Grief Experience: What to Expect after the Loss of a Loved One

Grief is a normal and natural response to loss, one that we will all encounter at different times throughout our lives. However, as normal and natural a process as grief may be, the intense anguish and despair that we experience after losing a loved one may in fact feel anything but normal. We may feel unprepared for the depth of our sorrow, and overwhelmed by the intensity of our feelings. While there is no way to bypass the difficult journey of grief, learning a bit about what to expect in the months following a loss can help ease the way.

What to Expect

- Grief can be an intense and all-consuming experience, unlike any other
- Grief can be unpredictable, with unexpected “grief attacks”
- Grief is a series of peaks and valleys. There will be good days and bad days
- Everyone experiences grief differently. ***There is no one right way to grieve***
- Grief affects a person’s entire being emotionally, mentally, and physically

Emotional Responses

1. Shock, disbelief, numbness
2. Denial
3. Anger
4. Guilt and Regret
5. Depression
6. Fear and Anxiety
7. Feeling overwhelmed

Mental Responses

1. Feeling like you are “going crazy” (you are not!)
2. Forgetfulness
3. Difficulty concentrating
4. Being distracted while driving
5. Starting tasks and never finishing them
6. Dreams or nightmares
7. Lack of interest in things you used to enjoy

Physical Responses

1. Difficulty falling or staying asleep, or sleeping more than usual
2. Feeling tired or “slowed down”
3. Lack of appetite, eating less than usual, or overeating
4. Muscle and joint pain
5. Nausea or dizziness
6. Frequent sighing

What May Complicate Grief

Different factors in the life of a grieving person, their relationship with the deceased, and the circumstances of the death, can make working through the grief process more difficult. The presence of any of the factors noted below does not guarantee that grief will be more complicated, but it is helpful to be aware of them and their impact on grief.

1. Other big life events, whether positive or negative
2. Making changes in your life too soon in the grief process
3. Delaying the grief process
4. Having had no opportunity to say goodbye
5. Feeling guilty about, or responsible for, the death
6. Multiple deaths (or even losses)
7. Sudden/Unexpected death
8. Disenfranchised grief – grief deemed inappropriate or unacceptable by others, such as that experienced by an ex-spouse, or at the miscarriage of a child
9. Dependent relationships
10. Conflicted relationships
11. Unfinished business with the deceased

When to be concerned

The grief responses mentioned herein are normal in the first few months following your loss, and they will likely disappear on their own as time passes. However, if you are still experiencing these symptoms many months after the death of your loved one, or if they continue at a high level of intensity that interferes with your daily life, we encourage you to seek therapeutic intervention with a professional psychotherapist.

- If you are having thoughts of harming yourself, please seek help from a mental health professional immediately. This is beyond Niagara Hospice scope of practice.

Niagara County Crisis Services is available 24 hours a day at 285-3515.