

Aging Considerations: Grief and Loss

Like stress, grief is a part of everyone's life, but it seems to happen more often when we are older because of natural occurrences that represent loss. Individual experiences of intensity and duration of grief are different.

There is no "right" way to grieve. Grief is a natural response and may come with a loss of any kind (whether it was expected or not, whether it is the loss of a pet or a job or financial security). Sometimes one loss seems to lead to another and as losses compound, older adults are at higher risk for developing a mental health disorder.

Likewise, if a person tries to stay too busy to think about or feel a loss, or tries to continue to numb the pain or cut off feelings (by using alcohol or tranquilizers), they are at risk for developing mental and/or physical illness. People respond to grief physically and emotionally.

Common grief responses include:

- * Disbelief, feeling numb and shocked, unable to accept the loss as a reality
- * Anger or frustration that the loss had to occur at all
- * Sadness with feelings of helplessness, despair and isolation
- * Changes in energy, appetite and sleeping habits
- * Yearning for the person that was lost
- * Relief that any suffering is over

Anxiety and depression can be components of a grieving process though if the symptoms persist beyond a couple of months, or if they are so intense that they interfere with daily functioning, they may need treatment.

A child's death arouses an overwhelming sense of injustice - for lost potential, unfulfilled dreams and senseless suffering. Parents may feel responsible for the child's death, no matter how irrational that may seem. Parents may also feel that they have lost a vital part of their own identity.

A spouse's death is very traumatic. Older adults may be especially vulnerable when they lose a spouse because it means losing a longtime companion with shared experiences. The death may necessitate major social adjustments and changes in daily routine.

Death of friends may compound to have a dramatic effect as one senses a loss of a social and support network with peers. These losses also remind people of their own mortality. Individuals may experience a loss of common culture and shared experiences when losing friends.

What You Need to Know...



A loss due to suicide can be among the most difficult losses to bear. They may leave the survivors with a tremendous burden of guilt, anger and shame. Survivors may even feel responsible for the death. Seeking counseling during the first weeks after the suicide is particularly beneficial and advisable.

Be assured that grief is healthy and appropriate and will help you come to terms with your loss. It takes time to fully absorb the impact of a major loss. You never stop missing your loved one, but the pain eases after time and allows you to go on with your life.

For more information, contact Mental Health America of Wisconsin at (414) 276-3122 or visit us on the web at www.mhawisconsin.org.

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