

Grief

Normal / uncomplicated grief

Grief is the “normal” response to the loss of someone or something precious. “It is an active process which can be experienced as the result of a loss or prior to a loss, known as **anticipatory grief.**” [1]

“Grief is the emotional, physical, intellectual, behavioural and spiritual process of adjusting to loss.” [1] There is no “normal” timeframe for grieving as the person may re-experience grief reactions many months and years after the losses.

Abnormal / complicated grief

Complicated grief “is marked by the presence of symptoms experienced daily or to a marked degree, for at least 6 months, causing clinically significant impairment in the social, occupational or other areas of functioning.” [1] The symptoms may include “intrusive thoughts of the deceased, yearning and/or searching for the deceased and excessive loneliness since the death.” [1]

Risk factors for complicated grief

- Sudden and unexpected death
- Loss of a child
- Death after a lengthy illness
- Death perceived as preventable
- Nature of relationship with the deceased that was markedly angry, ambivalent or dependent
- Multiple losses or additional stressors
- Mental health concerns
- A mourner’s perception of lack of support

Communicating with grieving persons [2]

- Use the deceased’s name.
- Acknowledge the death: “*I am sorry that [Sue] died.*”
- Talk about the deceased and memories: “*What are you remembering about [Sue] today?*”
- Bring closure to the death: “*Do you have questions about [Sue’s] final illness or treatment?*”
- Talk about grief feelings: “*How has [Sue’s] death affected you?*”

What not to say/do [2]

- “*I understand*” or “*I know how you feel*”
- “*It’s for the best*” or “*There was a reason*”
- “*Time heals*” or “*You will get over it*”
- Giving examples of those who are “worse off”
- Paternalistic responses: “*[Sue] is happy now*” or “*it’s God’s will.*”
- Being casual or aloof: a quick “*call me*” or “*how are you?*”
- Disallowing patient’s feelings: “*You should be getting over this by now.*”

When to refer to specialized services

“When grieving becomes more complicated, a referral for more intense grief counseling may be required to help the person manage his and/or her grief.” [1]