

Anticipatory Grief - Grieving Before a Loss

Understanding the different forms and experiences of grief

Understanding this form of grief

Anticipatory grief describes grief that begins before a death or major loss. It may occur when somebody has a life-limiting illness, dementia or a condition that is progressively changing a relationship.

There is no requirement to experience grief in a particular order or to reach a particular emotional milestone. What matters is understanding your own response, noticing what support is useful and allowing the significance of the loss to be recognised.

How it can feel

People may grieve changes that are already happening as well as the future they fear losing. Caring responsibilities, uncertainty and repeated changes can make this form of grief exhausting.

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Why this grief can be difficult

Love, fear, anger, guilt and relief may coexist. Thinking about life after the person dies can feel disloyal, but anticipating practical or emotional realities can be part of the mind trying to prepare.

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What may help

Support can include honest conversations where appropriate, practical help for carers, rest, information about the condition and somewhere safe to talk about feelings that may be difficult to share within the family.

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Emotional and physical effects

Grief can affect sleep, appetite, energy, concentration, memory, digestion, muscle tension and anxiety as well as mood. New, severe, persistent or worrying physical symptoms should be medically checked rather than automatically attributed to grief.

Supporting yourself

Keep expectations realistic. Simple food, drinks, rest, daylight, manageable movement, written reminders and practical help can reduce pressure. Connection can help, but time alone can also be important. There is no single coping strategy that suits everybody.

Therapy and additional support

Not everyone needs counselling. Person-centred or bereavement counselling can provide a place to talk without being hurried. A GP can help if grief, depression, anxiety, trauma symptoms or physical problems are substantially affecting daily life. Where a death was traumatic, trauma-focused work should be undertaken with an appropriately qualified practitioner when suitable.

A Message From Me

Grief is not a test you have to pass. Different losses create different experiences, and two people can live through the same event and grieve in completely different ways. I hope this guide helps you put words around what you are carrying and reminds you that you do not have to force your grief into somebody else's timetable.

Books and places for support

Grief Works - Julia Samuel
The Grieving Brain - Mary-Frances O'Connor
It's OK That You're Not OK - Megan Devine
The Plain Guide to Grief - John Wilson

Cruse Bereavement Support
NHS grief, bereavement and loss information
Samaritans: 116 123
Space to Breathe Therapy - Support Hub

With warmth,

Maggie

Space to Breathe Therapy