

Understanding Complicated Grief

When people lose someone close to them, there is a very difficult adjustment period as they learn to accept the loss of a loved one. Nevertheless, with time they are usually able to make this adjustment while finding ways to stay connected to the memory of the person they lost.

However, for different reasons it can be difficult for some to adjust to losing a loved one and some losses can continue to affect some people for many years down the track. This is what we call Complicated Grief – **where the normal grieving and sadness continues to significantly interfere with a person’s life, months and years after the loss.** Whilst there are similarities in the way people grieve, no one person grieves in the same way as another.

Below is a list of some common grief reactions that people experience.

Feelings

- shock, disbelief and denial
- sadness, depression and guilt
- anger and bitterness
- longing and loneliness
- emptiness or emotional numbing
- envy (e.g., of people who have not lost a loved one)

Thoughts

- “I’ll never get over this”
- “It’s my fault”/ “It should have been me”
- “I can’t believe this happened”/ “This is not real”
- “I’ll never be loved again”/ “I’ll be alone forever”
- “Why did this happen?”
- being preoccupied with memories of the deceased
- trying not to think about the deceased
- seeing or hearing the deceased

Behaviours

- withdrawal from friends and family
- avoid being alone
- avoid reminders of the deceased (e.g., putting away photos, avoiding conversations about the deceased) or the opposite, preoccupation with the deceased (e.g., setting a place at the table)
- increased alcohol and/or other drug use
- reckless behaviour

Physical reactions

- sleep problems and fatigue
- loss of appetite
- concentration problems
- loss of motivation
- anxiety symptoms (e.g., heart pounding, breathing difficulties, being tense)
- pain in the same area of the body, or same symptoms as the person who died

Dealing with grief

People often have some questions about their grief. Take a moment to read through the questions below and talk to your GP or therapist about these or other questions you may have.

Is there one right way to grieve?

Whilst there are lots of similarities in the way people grieve, no one person grieves in the same way as another. In fact, having rigid expectations about how you should grieve can often make it harder.

Are there stages of grieving that you must go through?

Many people discuss grief as a series of stages that people must pass through (e.g., denial, shock, anger, despair). There is no evidence that you need to pass through these stages. Again, everyone grieves differently.

Do you have to 'move on' or 'let go' of the person?

People often advise you that you have to break your relationship with the deceased. Obviously, for a loved one this is impossible. Instead, some goals of grieving include accepting their death and finding a way to remember the deceased that is meaningful but not all encompassing or overwhelming.

Do people 'get over it'?

People do not 'get over' the death of their loved ones. Whilst most people adapt over time and get used to the loss, some aspects of grief never end. People change after a serious loss and these differences can be both positive (e.g., an increase in self-understanding and maturity) and negative. Recovering from the loss of a loved one is often about finding a way to remember the deceased while finding ways to re-engage in life and managing distressing emotions when they come up.

Getting help

When grief begins to interfere with your life over an extended period of time, psychological therapy can be useful to try to help you come to terms with your reactions and how to manage them. Often there are blocks which get in the way of us recovering from the death of a loved one. Therapy can help you uncover and address these 'blocks' to reconnecting with and enjoying your life while remembering and honouring the person you have lost. Therapy may be able to help you deal with what's happened in the past, to accept the death of your loved one and to start thinking about your future.

One of the most effective treatments is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). This approach recognises that the way we think and act affects the way we feel. During this therapy you will learn:

- to identify ways of thinking about your loss that prevent you from dealing with your grief
- strategies to help you re-engage with activities and social supports you used to enjoy and set goals for the future
- to safely confront memories, places or people associated with your loss that you have been avoiding because it causes significant distress.

Self-management resources

Below is a list of internet and other written resources that may complement the treatment plan that you have discussed with your doctor.

- There are currently no resources specific to complicated grief. However, the following website has useful information on grief more generally: Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (www.grief.org.au).
- At Ease website (www.at-ease.dva.gov.au) is a Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) website with information on mental health and wellbeing including the 'Wellbeing Toolbox', which is an online interactive program, anxiety management and alcohol resources. A Mental Health and Wellbeing after Military Service booklet is also available to order or download from this website

Veterans Line 1800 011 046 can be reached 24 hours a day across Australia for crisis support and counselling. This service is provided by the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS).