



Grief and Loss

Grief is the emotional pain that we experience in response to a significant loss. There are many types of losses a person may experience that could result in feelings of grief, such as the death of a loved one, the ending of a relationship, an adverse medical diagnosis, and much more. Although difficult, grief is a natural and healthy way to process a loss.

What is grief?

Grief can be described as a set of emotions, such as shock, sadness, anger, confusion, or anxiety, experienced in response to a loss. Although often very unpleasant, grieving is a natural and healthy way to process a loss. Allowing oneself time to process a loss and experience the grieving process may promote healthy long-term coping.

Different Types of Grief

There are many different types of grief. **Anticipatory grief** is grief that is experienced prior to an actual loss. For example, a person may experience anticipatory grief when a loved one is dealing with a terminal illness or when they are anticipating the end of their marriage due to a pending divorce. Although anticipatory grief can be difficult to experience, it may help in processing the grief that occurs after the actual loss.

Unexpected or sudden grief is grief that is experienced in response to a loss that was very sudden and not at all anticipated. For example, if a loved one dies suddenly or you are laid off from your job with no warning, you may experience this type of grief. Unexpected or sudden grief can be challenging to process and can often result in feelings of shock or confusion. This type of grief may take longer to process due to not having time to prepare in advance of the loss.

Cumulative grief may be experienced by those who have experienced a series of losses. For example, a person may experience cumulative grief when a pet dies and then a month later, their grandmother dies. A person may also experience cumulative grief when they experience a new loss but still have unresolved feelings from a prior loss, even if it occurred long ago.

Ambiguous grief may be experienced by those faced with a loss that feels unclear or unresolved. For example, if a loved one in the military is missing in action, one may experience both grief at the loss and hope that the loved one will be found safe. Ambiguous grief may also be experienced by those caring for a loved one with dementia or a similar illness. The caretaker may experience loss even though the loved one is still alive. Grief in response to an

ambiguous loss can be challenging to process and may not be readily understood or even acknowledged by others.

Absent grief is experienced when a person feels as if they aren't grieving as much as they "should be" given the circumstances. Absent grief can sometimes be experienced when someone has already processed much of their grief due to anticipatory grief or when they are attempting to delay or fully avoid the difficult emotions that have come with a loss. Everyone grieves differently and experiencing absent grief is not necessarily unhealthy. Rather, it may be a sign to check in with yourself to determine how you feel about your process of grieving.

Stages of Grief

When a loss occurs, some people may move through a series of stages in their grieving process.

Some may experience each stage, whereas others only experience one or two. These stages may progress in a linear order, but more often a person may experience these stages in a pattern that is uniquely their own.

- **Denial.** In order to attempt to protect oneself from the difficult emotions related to a loss, a person may minimize the loss, attempt to numb or avoid all feelings related to the loss, or even pretend that the loss never happened.
- **Anger.** It can sometimes feel safer and more powerful to experience anger rather than the difficult emotions associated with grief, such as sadness and fear. For example, even if there is no one to directly blame for a loss, a grieving person may become angry at themselves, at the universe, or at God.
- **Bargaining.** A person anticipating or experiencing grief may feel as if they are bargaining for a different outcome and trying to find a way to feel more in



control of an uncontrollable situation. For example, trying to make deals or promises with the universe to save a loved one with a terminal illness would describe this stage of grief.

- **Depression.** After the reality of a loss starts to set in, a period of sadness, hopelessness, or loneliness may begin. Most often, the experience of depression caused by grief is not considered to be a mental health disorder. Rather it is an uncomfortable, but natural part of the grieving process.
- **Acceptance.** Accepting a loss does not mean that we no longer experience any difficult emotions related to the loss. Rather, it means acknowledging that our life has changed or will change in significant ways and trying to find ways to cope and make meaning in the process of moving forward.

Complicated Grief

Grief is a normal and healthy reaction to a loss; however, there are times in which a person may experience grief in such a way that it become unhealthy. Very prolonged intense experiences of grief, feelings of guilt or self-blame, having a difficult time managing everyday routines, and thoughts of suicide or self-harm are all indicators of complicated grief. Those experiencing complicated grief are strongly encouraged to speak to a mental health professional for support and guidance.

Coping with Grief

Finding ways to help cope with the challenging emotions associated with a loss can help in the grieving process. One key aspect to healthy coping in response to grief is to find ways to connect with others. Whether you talk with a loved one or a trusted friend, a religious or cultural leader, a counselor or therapist, or others in a peer-led support group, it is important to find ways in which you can express yourself and avoid feelings of isolation.

Rituals, services, or other gatherings may also be an important way in which we process grief. Our culture can have a significant influence on the way in which we recognize and grieve a loss. For example, those with spiritual beliefs may find it healing to participate in a ceremony with their faith community.

Additional ideas for coping with grief are available from the Jed Foundation in the article “How to Deal with Grief and Loss” found here: <https://jedfoundation.org/resource/how-to-deal-with-grief-and-loss/>

Additional Resources

There are many resources available on grief and related topics. As a place to start, check out the following resources available from the Jed Foundation (jedfoundation.org/mental-health-resource-center).

- [Understanding Grief](#)
- [How to Deal with Grief and Loss](#)

Seeking Help & Support

If you are experiencing grief, there are many sources of support available to you. For support in coping with grief, some people may choose to see a mental health professional, such as a counselor or therapist. Others may choose to seek self-help resources or support from peer groups.

As an Anoka Technical College student, a great place to start is with a college counselor. Counseling services are available to students at no charge. See the box title “Counseling Services” for additional details.

For self-help resources, check out the information available from the Jed Foundation found in the “Additional Resources” section.

There are also many valuable community resources available off campus. Visit the Anoka Technical College student resources webpage to view the content listed under the section “Mental Health and Chemical Dependency Resources” found here: <https://www.anokatech.edu/student-services/student-basic-needs-resources/>

If in crisis, contact the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline by calling or texting 988. This is a free and confidential service that provides support to people in distress and information regarding crisis resources. If there is immediate risk of harm to self or others, call 911.

Counseling Services

Counseling services are available to support Anoka Technical College students. A counselor can talk with you about any concerns or difficulties you are facing, provide support, and help in developing strategies and skills to promote wellness and goal achievement. Counseling services are confidential and free. You are encouraged to reach out for support.

To learn more about counseling services, visit: <https://www.anokatech.edu/student-services/counseling-services/>

To schedule an appointment with a counselor, visit the weblink above or call 763-576-7860.