

Complicated Grief

We all grieve when a loved one, friend, or acquaintance dies. It is always painful to face the death of someone you know. Unfortunately, many do not understand the dynamics of grief, thus when trying help someone to heal they cause more pain and suffering. They expect the one who is grieving to “snap out of it” or to “get over it.” The truth is you never get over it. On the other hand you can learn how to cope and how to resume normal life even when facing loss.

It is important to note that people mourn when there is a loss of anything, not just of a relative or friend, but also the loss of the ability to function the way they always do. For example: children lose baby teeth, a pet dies, a child graduates from high school, a lover abandons you, a friend leaves you, a relative moves away, a spouse succumbs to cancer, retirement occurs, you are fired from the job, a leg is amputated.

The grieving process can last from two weeks to two years. There is no required length for grieving. We all grieve in different ways and for different lengths. Ivan Chan, a specialist in dealing with grief and loss states “It is also quite normal to be able to experience joy, contentment, and humor even amidst the worst loss. Factors contributing to soothing grief include strong social support, optimism, and physical exercise. Most people recover from grief and can continue with their usual activities, while still feeling moments of sadness, within six months. Some people feel better after about a year to a year and a half. For others, their grief may be longer lasting, continuing for years without seeming to improve or with any break, and this may be due to factors before the loss such as pre-existing depression or high dependency on the departed.”

COMPLICATED GRIEF

When someone dies, who was ill we do mourn, but the intensity of the loss might not as greatly as when there is unexpected death. This brings me to the topic of complicated grief. Complicated grief occurs when there is an unexpected or violent death, suicide of a loved one, lack of a support system or friendships, traumatic childhood experiences, such as abuse or neglect, childhood separation anxiety, close or dependent relationship to the deceased person, being unprepared for the death; in the case of a child's death, the number of remaining children and, lack of resilience or adaptability to life changes.

Here is what one psychologist gives as the signs and symptoms of complicated grief:

- Extreme focus on the loss and reminders of the loved one
- Intense longing or pining for the deceased
- Problems accepting the death
- Numbness or detachment

- Preoccupation with your sorrow
- Bitterness about your loss
- Inability to enjoy life
- Depression or deep sadness
- Difficulty moving on with life
- Trouble carrying out normal routines
- Withdrawing from social activities
- Feeling that life holds no meaning or purpose
- Irritability or agitation
- Lack of trust in others

When these signs and symptoms are present it is best to talk to someone. However, when the following symptoms are evident, it is wise to seek professional help from someone who is trained and knowledgeable about grief and loss:

- Intense pining or longing for the deceased that occurs daily or is distressing or disruptive
- Trouble accepting the death
- Inability to trust others after the death
- Difficulty moving forward with life
- Excessive bitterness or anger related to the death
- Feeling emotionally numb or detached from others
- A feeling that life is now meaningless
- A belief that the future won't be fulfilling
- Increased agitation or jumpiness

These symptoms can cause numerous complications. They include: depression, suicidal thoughts or behaviors, increased risk of heart disease, cancer and high blood pressure, anxiety, long-term impairment in daily living, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, smoking or nicotine use. Some of these complications may not only require psychological help by medication assistance.

We must be more sensitive and understanding with someone who is grieving. Avoid saying things that can cause further pain. Avoid saying “God knows best,” “just pray about it,” or “snap out of it” or “don’t cry” or “don’t talk about it anymore.” These are myths and unrealistic expectations when grieving. Just be there for the person. Allow them to grieve. Encourage them to talk about their loss. Encourage them to cry and feel their pain. This is best for recovery.

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