

A Guide to Different Types of Grief



Grief may be a universal emotion; however, we all experience it in completely different ways. There is no time scale to grief or an "average" experience. Whilst we will all inevitably face grief in our lifetimes, we may not be aware that there are several types of grief. All are valid and we may experience several of them at different stages. Here we describe the different types of grief.

What is grief?

Grief is one of the most misunderstood emotions, and this could be down to the fact that we all experience it differently and there are several variations, depending on different circumstances and scenarios.

Grief is a strong and intense emotion that occurs when we face loss. This can be a person or a thing, such as losing a house or a job. In fact, anything we lose that we had a strong emotional connection with can cause us to grieve. Whilst grief is a natural response, it can be a messy process. Some have tried to simplify this process by saying we move through stages of grief from denial to acceptance. Whilst we do tend to experience these stages, they may not necessarily be in an ordered linear sequence. How we grieve may be unique to us and will depend on a variety of factors from age and personality to health and personal circumstances. However, all our grieving experiences can derive from the types of grief we discuss below.

Different Types of Grief

Normal or Common Grief

Whilst no grief is "normal", this type refers to a grief response that is the most common. Reactions to a loss can be both physical and psychological. Despite the confusing and misleading name of "normal", this grief will involve a range of feelings such as: fatigue, anger, denial, sadness, insomnia, guilt, loss of interest, confusion, disbelief, the inability to concentrate and much more. Normal grief means that although the grief is intense, the person will eventually move towards acceptance of the loss and the symptoms that they have will alleviate over time. Although the loss will be difficult, they are able to continue to engage in basic daily activities.

With normal or common grief, people tend to carry on with their normal routine and can appear normal from the outside, but they may feel intense bursts of numbness or pain. Often these feelings come and go and may not be obvious to others. Over time the intensity of these feelings tend to lessen until the griever learns a new normal.

Anticipatory Grief

Anticipatory grief can occur when there is a reaction to a death that was anticipated. An example of this is when an individual dies from a long-term illness that they knew was terminal. This type of grief is less well known and highlights that the grieving process does not necessarily start when the person dies. It can occur earlier, before the loss has actually taken place. As soon as someone accepts that a loved one is going to die, they can start beginning to grieve.



Grieving preceding a loss can be extremely confusing, as the person may feel guilty that they are already having these feelings when their loved one is still here. Anticipatory grief can lead to people experiencing anger and helplessness. Not only can the grief be about the loss of life, it can be the loss of other things such as future plans and dreams.

Although this type of grief is technically different, it does not make it any easier. For some, anticipatory grief can be challenging and difficult to deal with. Others may use this grief as a realisation that they need to make the most of the remaining time they have with their loved one. It is also complex, as seeing someone suffer and finally seeing them no longer in pain can bring a feeling of relief which can form a strong sense of guilt.

Delayed Grief

Delayed grief can occur when the typical symptoms we commonly associate with grief are not experienced directly after a person's death. Instead, they occur much later on. This can sometimes be caused because the person is consciously or subconsciously avoiding the pain of grief and try and suppress these feelings. Unfortunately, this is rarely successful, and people find themselves suddenly overwhelmed with grief later on.

For some people, the feelings of grief can become stronger over time and can often occur when someone who is grieving has other significant things in their life to deal with such as looking after their family, losing a job or having health problems of their own.

Chronic Grief

Chronic grief is when someone suffers from strong grief reactions that last a long period of time without subsiding. There doesn't seem to be any progress and people do not start to feel better which can impact their ability to carry out everyday tasks.

Cumulative Grief

Cumulative grief can occur when another loved one dies whilst the person is still grieving for someone else. This type of grief is also sometimes referred to as grief or bereavement overload. If someone has experienced several losses over a short period of time the griever can sometimes feel lost and unable to cope. It is important that they reach for help if they feel like it's too much, as this type of grief can often lead to depression.

Collective Grief



Collective grief can occur when a group of people feel the same sense of grief. This can be due to a natural disaster, a result of war, a terrorist attack, the death of a public figure or a national tragedy.

Absent Grief

Absent grief can happen when the bereaved shows no signs of grief at all and act as if nothing has happened. It is important to know that this reaction can be extremely common and part of “normal grief” so should not be confused. Even if someone is not expressing their grief in an obvious way, it doesn’t mean they are not

grieving. Also, the initial shock of the death can mean they do not show these feelings of loss until later (see delayed grief). Absent grief is different. It occurs when there are no signs of grief at all for an extended period of time. This reaction can become concerning.

Inhibited Grief

Similar to absent grief, inhibited grief can occur when the griever avoids facing the reality that they have lost someone or something and focuses all their attention on other things. Although people often find it beneficial to focus some of their time on other things, avoiding feelings completely can end up causing more pain. Inhibited grief can lead to exhaustion, digestive problems, nausea, migraines and other physical symptoms. Alternatively, it may lead to delayed grief (see above).

The types of grief described above are just some of the known types. It can be helpful for people to understand that grief is a complex matter and there is not just one type. Knowing the different types can help people come to terms with the fact that there is not one way or type of process for grief. Depending on the scenario, people can experience grief in many ways.

Understanding the differences between these types can help people know they are not alone in the way they are coping with a death or anticipated death of a loved one. Whilst grief is separated into these types to help highlight their differences, it is important to know that people cannot simply categorise their grief. For example, even if someone identifies that they or a loved one is dealing with delayed grief, this does not mean that everyone dealing with delayed grief will be acting in the exact same way.

Understanding the different types can not only help you to interpret your own feelings but it can also help you to support others who are going through it.