

TIP SHEET: ANTICIPATORY GRIEF AND LOSS

ANTICIPATORY GRIEF AND MOURNING

Grief does not wait for death to happen; it occurs both in anticipation of and following a loss. Extended illness, disability, severe accidental injury, a terminal diagnosis or the aging and decline of an elderly family member can produce what is known as anticipatory grief and mourning. We find ourselves reacting and continually adapting not only to an expected loss, but to all the losses – past, present, and future – that are encountered in that experience.

Anticipatory mourning begins as soon as we become aware that death may happen. It begins when a life-threatening illness is diagnosed or a terminal prognosis is given, we understand that there is no cure, and we realize that death is likely or inevitable.

THE GRIEF PROCESS

The feelings and symptoms of grief can take on many different forms, and is unique for each of us. There is no right or wrong way to feel, and there is no specific rule that says you have to finish grieving after a certain time. The important thing is that you take the time you need to go through the various stages of grief, and to be able to acknowledge your feelings along the way.

There are generally five stages of grief that we go through when we have a loss. We don't go through the stages in any particular order, and there is no time limit as to how long a person may experience each stage. The stages are:

- **Denial:** Someone in this stage is in shock and disbelief about the loss. They are unable to acknowledge the loss, and may try to ignore it or pretend that nothing has happened. This stage can help protect a person from the immediate intensity of the loss.
- **Bargaining:** In this stage a person may focus on ways they could have prevented the loss, or on what they might have done differently. Sometimes a person will try to make a deal with someone or something in the belief that those actions can be undone. Feelings of guilt are common in this stage.
- **Anger:** At this point, a person begins to realize the lack of control and power they had in preventing the loss. A person in this stage may lash out at friends, family, and their faith system. Sometimes the person will feel anger about being abandoned or left alone. There may be attempts to blame others for not preventing the loss.

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- **Depression:** The impact of the loss is felt in this stage, as well as the significance of the loss. People may have crying spells, difficulty eating or sleeping, poor concentration, and lack of energy.
- **Acceptance:** In this stage, people come to an understanding of what the loss means to them and begin to move forward. They have integrated the loss with their life experiences. They have resolved their feelings about the loss, and they have finished grieving.

COPING WITH LOSS

The grief process may be different for every person. What may work for one person who experienced a loss may not work for you. How you cope with a loss is going to depend on what works for you, and not what other people consider to be the “right” way to grieve. Listed below are some tips to help you through this difficult time:

- Identify your support system. While you may sometimes feel alone as you are grieving, you are not. There are other people in your life that you can use for support. They may be family, friends, support groups, people in your faith community, or mental health professionals.
- Express your feelings. Do not be afraid to tell people how you feel or to express those feelings. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to feel. If it is difficult to verbalize how you feel, use other methods like journaling or drawing to express yourself. It is important to acknowledge your feelings in order to help you better cope with the loss.
- Take care of yourself. When we deal with a stressful situation like a loss, it is easy to forget about taking care of ourselves. It is important that you remember to eat and sleep adequately. It is okay to give yourself a break from the grief. Sometimes we need a diversion from the stress to allow us the opportunity to recharge mentally. Keeping ourselves healthy makes it easier to deal with the loss. Avoid drinking alcohol or using drugs as they will inhibit or prevent you from moving forward with your grief.
- Do what works for you. Everybody has their own way of coping. For some people going to wakes and funerals, when the loss is a death, is important to them since it gives them a feeling of closure. For others going to those events is too difficult, and they find other ways for closure such as creating a memorial, or engaging in an act to honor the lost person, such as planting flowers or donating to a favorite charity in their name. Whatever will help you deal with the loss in a healthy, productive way is acceptable.

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- Plan for the future. When we lose someone close to us, there will come times, like anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, and other special events, that will evoke intense feelings and emotions. This is normal and should be expected. Planning ahead on how you will handle those times can make those special days less difficult.

Coping with a loss is difficult as we struggle with our feelings while trying to say “goodbye”. Going through the grieving process is not something that must be done alone. If you find yourself having difficulty coping with loss, reach out for help.