

Anticipatory Grief & Loss

Grief takes many forms and is not only experienced after a person dies. Anticipatory grief is the experience a person may have in the days, months or even years prior to the death of a significant person or in relation to another impending loss.

It is the experience of knowing that change is coming, and is felt on many levels, emotional, physical, and spiritual. It also affects how we think and our relationship with others. A person experiencing anticipatory grief may feel uncertain about what the future holds or guilt about wanting a person's suffering to end.

People experiencing anticipatory grief say things like:

- » 'I am feeling a rollercoaster of emotions'
- » 'It is so distressing to watch him suffer'
- » 'I feel so guilty when I leave her' or
- » 'I dread the day'

Common signs of anticipatory grief include:

- » Sadness/tearfulness
- » Anxiety
- » Anger or fear
- » Guilt
- » Depression
- » Emotional numbness

Scenarios that may provoke anticipatory grief include but are not limited to:

- » During end-of-life care
- » When a person is a carer
- » When a person is diagnosed with a life-limiting illness such as cancer or dementia
- » When a companion animal becomes unwell
- » When a person loses a body part such as prior to an amputation
- » Anticipatory loss may also occur with any life transition, such as moving into aged care or needing to use mobility aids

Anticipatory grief is a normal process, and it has a purpose. For those who are dying, anticipatory grief provides an opportunity for personal growth, to reflect on a life well lived and to find meaning. For families and friends this period may offer an opportunity to reconcile differences or to give and grant forgiveness. For all, it is a chance to say goodbye.

It is thought that family members, friends and the person who is dying will experience some unique stages, and although these are not linear and may be difficult to determine, it is believed there are four phases in the process:

- » Accepting that death is inevitable which often leads to with feelings of sadness or depression
- » Feeling concern for the dying person which often leads to thoughts of regret and how things could have been different
- » Rehearsing the death and focusing on saying goodbye
- » Imagining the future and how that may look.

If you or someone you know is experiencing anticipatory grief and loss it may help to:

- » **Express your emotions** – Talk or visit with family, friends, and health care professionals,
- » **Take care of your health** – Take time for yourself, get adequate rest, practice self-care when you can, socialise with others and accept offers of help
- » **Spend time together while you can** – Being together and expressing thoughts and feelings, being in silence or physical touch may help you to feel connected
- » **Stay informed** – Seek resources and ask for support if you need to
- » **Practice love, forgiveness and letting go** – If appropriate talk about your concerns or what you think needs to be said before a person dies
- » **Make plans** – If appropriate talk with the dying person about plans for the funeral, finances and wills, anything that will make it easier after the person dies

If you would like more support, download the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement's MyGrief App for immediate information about how to receive bereavement support or how to support someone who is grieving.

Contact the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement's Aged Care Support service on 1800 22 22 00 or at aged.grief.org.au to arrange to speak to a Specialist Bereavement Counsellor about telephone, online counselling or group support.