

Grief, Bereavement and Mourning

People cope with the loss of a loved one in many ways. For some, the experience may lead to personal growth, even though it is a difficult and trying time. There is no right way to cope with death. The way a person grieves depends on the personality of that person and the relationship with the person who has died.

Terms like grief, bereavement and mourning are often used in place of each other, but they have different meanings.

Grief

Grief is the normal process of reacting to the loss. Grief reactions may be felt in response to physical losses (for example, a death) or in response to symbolic or social loss (for example, divorce or loss of a job).

Each type of loss means the person has had something taken away. As a family goes through a cancer illness, many losses are experienced, and each triggers its own grief reaction.

Grief may be experienced as:

- Mental reactions
- Physical reactions
- Social reactions

As with bereavement, grief processes depend on the relationship with the person who died, the situation surrounding the death and the person's attachment to the person who died.

People who are grieving often feel extremely tired because the process of grieving usually requires physical and emotional energy. The grief they are feeling is not just for the person who died, but also for the unfulfilled wishes and plans for the relationship with the person. Death often reminds people of past losses or separations.

Bereavement

Bereavement is the period after a loss during which grief is experienced and mourning occurs. The time spent in a period of bereavement depends on how attached the person was to the person who died and how much time was spent anticipating the loss.

Mourning

Mourning is the process by which people adapt to a loss. Mourning is also influenced by cultural customs, rituals and society's rules for coping with loss.

Grief work includes the processes a mourner needs to complete before resuming daily life. These processes include separating from the person who died, readjusting to a world without him or her and forming new relationships.

To separate from the person who died, a person must find another way to redirect the emotional energy that was given to the loved one. This does not mean the person was not loved or should be forgotten, but that the mourner needs to turn to others for emotional satisfaction.

The mourner's roles, identity and skills may need to change to readjust to living in a world without the person who died. The mourner must give other people or activities the emotional energy that was once given to the person who died in order to redirect emotional energy.

Mourning may be described as having the following three phases:

- The urge to bring back the person who died
- Disorganization and sadness
- Reorganization

Resources

- AARP Grief and Loss Resources: www.aarp.org
- Americans for Better Care of Dying: www.abcd-caring.org

Some content on this page was gathered from documents found on the website for the National Cancer Institute, part of the U.S. National Institutes of Health. The website is located at www.cancer.gov

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