

Loss and Bereavement

Whether you are personally coping with a loss or helping a friend or a loved one through process of grief, it's a good idea to understand the processes that are associated with loss and the common terms that are used to describe them.

Grief is the process through which people cope with loss. Though it is commonly thought of only in reference to the death of a loved one, losses can occur in many different ways. An individual may grieve for the loss of a pet, a job, a divorce or the loss of a personal relationship, or even the loss of an expected future when a loved one is diagnosed with a life-changing illness.

Bereavement refers specifically to the process following a loss, during which grief occurs. There is no normal or expected amount of time for a person to grieve. Every individual processes each loss in their own way and in their own time.

Mourning is the way in which an individual adapts to the loss and is influenced by societal and cultural values and rules.

How grief is experienced is different from person to person. Though it has been commonly suggested that there are 5 stages to grief, not everyone, in reality, experiences the same emotions in the same order. Emotional reactions can include anger, guilt, despair, depression, sadness or anxiety. Similarly, physical reactions, such as sleeping problems, changes in appetite or illness, may vary between individuals. Some grieving individuals will also experience changes in their social habits and interactions with family members and friends.

When grief becomes complicated

While bereavement is an individual process a distinction can be made between uncomplicated and complicated grief. Uncomplicated grief is painful, disruptive and both emotionally and physically exhausting it is usually bearable. When grief becomes prolonged and intense, causing considerable impairment in work, health and social functioning, it may be considered complicated grief, which can benefit from treatment. Complicated grief can be chronic and unrelenting, warranting appropriate psychotherapeutic and/or medical treatments.