

Has Your Grief Turned into a Problem You Need to Address?

Objective

To identify signs that indicate your grief has turned into a psychological problem that needs to be addressed.

You Should Know

Healing from a loss is difficult and is almost always accompanied by feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, fear, and other emotions. Grief is a normal human emotion. It can be painful and intense in the immediate period following the loss, and then it often dissipates over time, though it may never disappear completely.

Sometimes, however, the intensity of grief does not dissipate and can develop into a serious psychological problem that can keep you from going about your daily activities or functioning adequately in your family or work life. You might be experiencing depression, anxiety, substance abuse, angry outbursts, eating disorders, or other coping strategies. Or, for many, some or all of those symptoms might have been present before the loss, but now they are getting worse, and the ability to cope is becoming more and more challenging. This is called “complicated grief disorder.”

Researchers estimate that between 10 and 20 percent of people who lose a loved one develop complicated grief. Some risk factors for developing the disorder include:

- Experiencing more than one death within a short period of time.
- Being very dependent on the individual who passed away.
- Deaths that are shocking, premature, and unexpected.
- Witnessing the death, or suffering during the period when the deceased person had an extended illness.
- History of depression, PTSD, or substance abuse.

This worksheet is designed to help you understand the difference between the “normal” emotions that accompany grief and those that fall under the category of “complicated grief,” and learn strategies for healing.

What to Do

Write down the name of the person(s) you lost and the date of the loss (or approximate date if you cannot recall). Note: Your loss might not be of a person—it might be a pregnancy, a beloved job, a love relationship, a pet, or something else.

Remember, there is no universal timeline for grief. Here are some typical signs and symptoms of what can be considered “normal grief,” which may last days, weeks, or several months. Place a checkmark next to the symptoms that apply to you.

- Crying or sobbing.
- Sleep disturbance—too much or too little, or trouble falling asleep.
- Lack of energy.
- Feeling apathetic or lethargic about getting through the day.
- Appetite changes—under- or overeating.
- Social withdrawal, including avoiding people or social events.
- Trouble concentrating or focusing on tasks at work, home, school, or elsewhere.
- Confusion or questioning your spiritual or religious beliefs, general life goals, and choices.
- Feeling angry, guilty, lonely, depressed, empty, sad, etc., but still capable of feeling happy or content.

If you checked many or all of these, you are experiencing normal grief after a loss. Experts agree that intense feelings of grief tend to diminish after about three months and sometimes up to six months. If your grief is persisting or intensifying beyond six months, then you might be experiencing complicated grief and you might benefit from professional counseling to help you through this difficult time in your life.

Here is a list of symptoms that are associated with **complicated grief**. Place a checkmark next to any items that apply to you.

- Obsessing or ruminating constantly over your loss.
- Feeling a deep, unbearable sadness that does not ease up.
- Expressing a sense of doom, gloom, and despair about your life.
- Being irritable and short-tempered.
- Ongoing sleep problems.
- Poor grooming and personal appearance (not caring about how you look).
- Refusing to or unable to leave your home.
- Feeling angry and bitter toward the world.
- Feeling guilty or self-blaming, thinking perhaps the death was your fault.
- Difficulty trusting others, pushing others away.

- Extended period of withdrawal from social interactions and previous activities.
- Minimizing, denying, or getting defensive when asked about your grief.
- Feeling distracted or disengaged at work, school, or home.
- Numbness or detachment.
- Escalation of preexisting psychological problems (e.g., depression, PTSD, anxiety disorder, substance abuse, etc.).
- Needing to be around mementos and reminders of your lost loved one, or, by contrast, strongly avoiding any reminders.
- Trouble managing daily affairs or completing tasks.
- Being reckless, impulsive, or potentially self-destructive.
- Persistent wish that you had died along with your loved one.
- Talk of suicide, or actual suicide attempts.

Note: If you are thinking about suicide, talk to someone you trust. If you think you may act on suicidal feelings, call 911 or your local emergency number right away. Or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (800-273-8255) to reach a trained counselor.

Now that you have a better sense of “normal” vs. “complicated” grief, here are some tips and strategies for working through this difficult time, especially if you have been suffering for longer than six months:

- Seek the help of a mental health professional, ideally one who specializes in grief, loss, bereavement, and so on.
- Get help identifying what preexisting conditions might be hampering your recovery from your loss, such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and so on.
- Ask for help from your counselor or doctor in finding a bereavement support group—breaking through your isolation can be powerfully healing.
- Consider a medication evaluation with a qualified psychiatrist.
- Learn and practice holistic mind-body techniques like yoga, meditation, art therapy, music therapy, acupuncture, Reiki, massage, or narrative writing therapy.
- Set goals to resume some of your previously pleasurable activities. Ask a friend or loved one for help in pushing through any resistance.
- Be kind to yourself as you readjust to your “new normal.”

It is important to know that by working on your healing and resuming pleasurable activities, you are not dishonoring your lost loved one. You are moving on with your life *and* honoring their memory and your loss at the same time.

What other ideas do you have for what might help you in your grieving process?

By what date would you like to reach out for help? Having a goal in mind can help you become active again and feel better more quickly. _____

Reflections on This Exercise

What is the most pressing symptom of grief that you are experiencing right now?

Whom can you talk to in the next few days about your grief?

What might get in the way of your taking action during this difficult time? What can you do to push through those obstacles?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
