

Common Grief Reactions in Adults

This table lists experiences common to the first several months or more of the grief process. Each person will experience a unique blend of symptoms and may not experience them all. If any of these symptoms cause significant distress or health problems, a physician should be consulted promptly.

PHYSICAL

- Pain
- Fatigue/exhaustion
- Low energy
- Sleep changes/disruption
- Appetite changes
- Shortness of breath
- Tight or heavy feeling in chest
- Feeling of tightness in throat
- Hollow feeling in stomach
- Stomach upset or pain
- Dry mouth
- Muscle tension or agitation
- Increased sensitivity to light, sound, smells, or other stimuli
- Clumsiness

EMOTIONAL

- Shock, numbness, emptiness
- Sadness, sorrow
- Loneliness, longing, yearning
- Anger, resentment
- Guilt, regret
- Fear, anxiety, insecurity
- Feeling helpless, out of control
- Relief
- Diminished self-concern
- Desire to join the deceased
- Feelings of betrayal, disloyalty
- Restlessness, listlessness,
- Irritability
- “Emotional roller coaster”

MENTAL

- Denial, disbelief
- Confusion, disorientation
- Absentmindedness, forgetfulness
- Difficulty focusing/concentrating, shortened attention span
- Low motivation
- Expecting to see or hear from deceased
- Preoccupation with deceased and story of the death, need to tell and retell story
- Dreams or images of the deceased
- Thinking one sees, hears, smells deceased
- Memories of past losses

SOCIAL/FAMILY

- Isolation from others
- Withdrawing from social activities
- Diminished desire for conversation and interaction
- Shifting roles in relationships
- New responsibilities
- Hiding/holding in grief out of desire to “not burden others”
- Difficulty relating to old friends or those who aren’t grieving
- Losing friends, making new friends

BEHAVIORAL

- Crying (sometimes unexpectedly)
- Searching
- Carrying mementos or holding onto deceased’s belongings
- Going to the grave, ash-scattering site, or special places
- Making and keeping an altar
- Looking at photos or videos
- Listening to tapes of the deceased
- Avoiding situations that arouse grief
- Staying busy to avoid emotion
- Assuming mannerisms of the deceased

SPIRITUAL/EXISTENCIAL

- Questions about God, higher power
- Affirming spiritual beliefs
- Doubting religion/spiritual beliefs
- Questions about the deceased:
 - Where are they now?
 - Can they see me?
 - Will I see them again?
- Questions about mortality, afterlife:
 - What will happen when I die?
- Existential questions:
 - What is the meaning of my life?
- Sensing the deceased’s presence, smell, sounds in dreams or waking life (sometimes called supernatural experiences)
- Awe, wonder, mystery

Information provided by: Center for Grief Care and Education at San Diego Hospice & Palliative Care