

Complicated Grief

Losing a loved one is one of the most distressing and, unfortunately, common experiences people face. Most people experiencing normal grief and bereavement have a period of sorrow, numbness, and even guilt and anger. Gradually these feelings ease, and it's possible to accept loss and move forward.

For some people, feelings of loss are debilitating and don't improve even after time passes. This is known as complicated grief. In complicated grief, painful emotions are so long lasting and severe that you have trouble accepting the loss and resuming your own life.

If you have complicated grief, seek treatment. It can help you come to terms with your loss and reclaim a sense of acceptance and peace.

During the first few months after a loss, many signs and symptoms of normal grief are the same as those of complicated grief. However, while normal grief symptoms gradually start to fade over a few months, those of complicated grief linger or get worse. Complicated grief is like being in a chronic, heightened state of mourning.

Signs and symptoms of complicated grief can include:

- Extreme focus on the loss and reminders of the loved one
- Intense longing or pining for the deceased
- Problems accepting the death
- Numbness or detachment
- Preoccupation with your sorrow
- Bitterness about your loss
- Inability to enjoy life
- Depression or deep sadness
- Trouble carrying out normal routines
- Withdrawing from social activities
- Feeling that life holds no meaning or purpose
- Irritability or agitation
- Lack of trust in others

When to see a doctor

It's normal to experience grief after a significant loss. Most people who experience normal or uncomplicated grief can move forward eventually with support from family and friends. But if it's been several months or more since your loss and your emotions remain so intense or debilitating that you have trouble going about your normal routine, talk to your health care provider.

Specifically, you may benefit from professional help if you:

- Can focus on little else but your loved one's death
- Have persistent pining or longing for the deceased person
- Have thoughts of guilt or self-blame
- Believe that you did something wrong or could have prevented the death
- Feel as if life isn't worth living

- Have lost your sense of purpose in life
- Wish you had died along with your loved one

At times, people with complicated grief may consider suicide. If you're thinking about suicide, talk to someone you trust. If you think you may act on suicidal feelings, call 111 or your local emergency services number right away.

Coping and support

Although it's important to get professional treatment for complicated grief, you can take steps on your own to cope, including:

- **Stick to your treatment plan.** Take medications as directed and attend therapy appointments as scheduled.
- **Exercise regularly.** Physical exercise helps relieve depression, stress and anxiety and can redirect your mind to the activity at hand.
- **Take care of yourself.** Get enough rest, eat a balanced diet and take time to relax. Don't turn to alcohol or illegal drugs for relief.
- **Reach out to your faith community.** If you follow religious practices or traditions, you may gain comfort from rituals or guidance from a spiritual leader.
- **Practice stress management.** Learn how to better manage stress. Unmanaged stress can lead to depression, overeating, or other unhealthy thoughts and behaviors.
- **Socialize.** Stay connected with people you enjoy being around. They can offer support, a shoulder to cry on or a joke to give you a little boost.
- **Plan ahead for special dates or anniversaries.** Holidays, anniversaries and special occasions can trigger painful reminders of your loved one. Find new ways to celebrate or acknowledge your loved one that provide you comfort and hope.
- **Learn new skills.** If you were highly dependent on your loved one, perhaps to handle the cooking or finances, for example, try to master these tasks yourself. Ask family, friends or professionals for guidance, if necessary. Seek out community classes and resources, too.
- **Join a support group.** You may not be ready to join a support group immediately after your loss, but over time you may find shared experiences comforting and you may form meaningful new relationships.

Written by Mayo Clinic Staff

www.mayoclinic.com