

Surviving Complicated Grief

By Catherine Owen

Grief can be complicated by guilt or depression. Grief can endure much longer than expected. Understanding long-term grieving will help you to survive it.

Grief is often viewed in a pre-packaged way in our culture, as if one can overcome it quickly in a series of five or more neat stages. However, grief often persists long after the first year following a death and can become complicated. Here are the signs of complicated grief and how to work through them.

Complicated Grief: The Signs

Everyone grieves differently and there is no one right way to grieve a loss. Yet some deaths appear harder to deal with than others and are thus more likely to lead to symptoms of complicated grief. If the death was violent, caused by addiction, happened prematurely, or in any way was implicated in feelings of guilt and shame, then grieving is going to be more complex. Some signs of complicated grief include:

- feelings of disbelief or denial
- recurrent nightmares and sleeping difficulties
- excessive drinking or drug use
- major weight loss or problems eating
- regular bouts of anger and weeping
- maintaining a fantasized relationship with the deceased person
- cutting off social ties or acting out in unusual ways

Complicated grief often manifests itself a year or more after the loved one's death. Just when people expect the griever to have healed, he or she can display symptoms of deepened grieving. Understanding that this situation can occur is the first step to empathy .

Complicated Grief: Coping & Surviving

While early grief can be more extreme and overwhelming, later, complicated grief can be even more difficult to endure. Much of this struggle is due to societal expectations; the griever is long supposed to have recovered from their grief and continue to function as they did prior to the death. This expectation compounds grief with guilt and the sense that one is becoming boring and unbearable to those around one. Such feelings further complicate the grieving process. Several ways to cope with and survive complicated grief are:

- Be patient with the range of feelings that occur: cry, rage, scream, rant. Get it out.
- Don't worry about those who react negatively to continued expressions of grief. They don't understand. They are afraid. There will always be few who can truly connect to pain and sorrow.
- Eat healthy foods. Sleep as well as possible. Exercise regularly. Get fresh air and try to limit the imbibing of alcohol and other depressants.
- Keep a routine that's supportive and consistent. Aim to limit major life decisions for awhile. Find allies who believe in well being and are able to continue to nourish the preservation of this daily structure.
- Create anything: a painting, a poem, a sculpture, a recipe. Transform suffering.
- Pamper: get a massage, pedicure. Lie on the beach. Watch a movie. Travel.
- Forgive all that cannot be changed. Move forward with compassion for the self.

Complicated grief can be survived. One needs to remember that it takes more time than ever expected. That the pain will likely never entirely be healed. But it can be endured. And the experience, hard as it is, can even, eventually, be celebrated.

Bibliography

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