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The Journey of Grief: A Path to Healing After Loss

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Activity

- On the yellow post its, list 3 loved ones (by name or by relationship).
- On the green post its, list 5 possessions (car, house, boat, clothing, phone, tablet, computer, etc.).
- On the blue post its, list 5 IADLs (managing finances, driving, using the phone, shopping, reading, housekeeping, managing medications, etc.).
- Line these horizontally with your yellow across the top, green in the middle, and blue at the bottom.

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Activity: Review

- How did this activity make you feel?
- Which loss bothered you the most?
 - Loved ones?
 - Possessions?
 - IADLs ?

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Activity: Review



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Objectives

- Define grief and bereavement
- Identify symptoms of grief
- Distinguish between typical and complicated grief
- Identify the types of loss experienced by older adults
- Apply interventions to facilitate healthy bereavement

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What is Grief ?

- **Grief** is the emotional reaction to a significant loss, such as the death of a loved one or no longer being independent with activities of daily living.
 - People may use the words "sorrow" and "heartache" to describe feelings of grief.
 - Whether an individual loses a beloved person, an animal, a place, an object, or a valued way of life (such as a job, marriage, or good health), some level of grief will naturally follow.

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What is Grief?

- **Anticipatory grief** is grief that is experienced in advance of an impending loss.
 - People may feel anticipatory grief for a loved one who is dying or for impending declines in functioning due to a progressive illness.
 - Similarly, both children and adults often feel the pain of losses brought on by an upcoming move or divorce. This anticipatory grief helps individuals prepare for such losses.

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What is Grief?

- **Grieving** is the process of emotional and life adjustment one goes through after a loss.
 - Grieving is a personal experience. Depending on who the person is and the nature of his or her loss, the process of grieving will be different from another person's experience.
 - Although grief myths suggests the grieving process lasts a year, there is no "normal and expected" period of time for grieving.
 - Some people adjust to a new life within several weeks or months.
 - Others take a year or more, particularly when their daily life has been radically changed or their loss was traumatic and unexpected.

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What is Bereavement?

- **Bereavement** is defined as the state or fact of being bereaved or deprived of something or someone.
 - This is a state of intense grief, as after the loss of a loved one.
 - Also recognized as a period of mourning after a loss, especially after the death of a loved one.

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What is Mourning?

- **Mourning** is to feel or express grief or sorrow
- Also known as the act of sorrowing.
- While grief refers to the internal experiences of loss, mourning is best defined as acts or outward expressions of grief.
- Some common examples of mourning can include preparing for a funeral, wearing black or sharing memories or stories about a loved one.

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How do we recognize Grief?



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Physical Reactions

Physical reactions that can be seen by a person experiencing grief include :

- | | |
|--|------------------------------|
| -Body Aches | -Restless, nervous, or wired |
| -Upset stomach, diarrhea, constipation | -Crying |
| -Changes in appetite | -Chills, sweats, cold hands |
| -Feeling weak or fatigued | -Chest pain, tightness, |
| -Weakened immune system | difficulty breathing |
| -Feeling empty or heavy | -Startle response |
| -Sleep disturbances | |

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Emotional Reactions

Emotional reactions that can be seen by a person experiencing grief include:

- Shock or feeling numb
- Sadness, sorrow, despair
- Anger, protest, irritability, resentment
- Guilt or regret
- Anxiety, either general or specific
- Fear of "going crazy"
- Helplessness, overwhelmed
- Mood swings
- Sense of calm, peace, or relief
- Apathy, lack of pleasure in anything
- Loneliness
- Yearning or pining

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Spiritual Reactions

Spiritual reactions that can be seen by a person experiencing grief include :

- “Why”
- Angry at God
- Visions, sensing a loved ones presence
- Feeling meaningless
- Questioning beliefs
- Feeling distant from faith
- Deepening of faith
- Difficulty praying or attending church
- Changes in views surrounding life

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Cognitive Reactions

Cognitive reactions that can be seen by a person experiencing grief include :

- Disbelief, unreality, “fog”
- Confusion
- Memory or concentration issues
- Ruminating about the loss
- Idealization of the deceased
- Difficulty with decisions
- Dreams or nightmares
- Absent-mindedness
- Denial
- Reviewing decisions or circumstances of the loss

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Social & Behavioral Reactions

Social & behavioral reactions seen by a person experiencing grief include:

- Can't relate to friends anymore
- Changes in friendships
- Feeling inadequate, insecure, low self esteem
- Social withdraw
- Avoiding
- Sexual desires change
- Substance and/or alcohol use
- Clinging, struggling with separation
- Lack of motivation

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Complicated Grief

For some people grieving a loss, the time of bereavement can become complicated.

People with complicated grief may notice that the experience of the grief and mourning become more intense as time goes on, making it difficult to function in their day to day life.



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Risk Factors for Complicated Grief

- Sudden, unexpected death or loss associated with traumatic memories.
- Death associated with an overly lengthy illness.
- Death of a child .
- Multiple losses .
- Substance abuse.
- Stigmatized deaths (AIDS, suicide, etc.).

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Risk Factors for Complicated Grief

- Perceiving death or loss as preventable.
- Unresolved past losses.
- History of Depression or other pre-existing diagnoses.
- Complex prior relationship with deceased or loss.
- Additional stressors such as caregiving responsibilities, family health issues, or problems at work.
- Perceived lack of social support .

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Warning Signs of Complicated Grief

- Depressive symptoms such as lack of motivation or interest in things the person used to enjoy.
- Feeling worthless, excessive guilt, or having suicidal thoughts.
- Inability to talk about the loss without great emotional distress.
- Substance abuse or other self destructive, acting out behaviors.



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Activity

- Form a group of 2-4 people.
- List at least 5 types of losses the older adult population experience.
- **You cannot use death of a person or persons....**let us focus on the harder to recognize losses.



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Common Losses

- As we age, there are a variety of significant losses we can experience. Grief is a normal response when we lose something or someone we care about.
- Changes in physical health; decreased vision and hearing, inability to walk or ambulate independently, incontinence, chronic pain, etc.
- Retirement, whether planned or not, can result in changes in income, social interactions, and self esteem.

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Common Losses

- Financial losses due to retirement, death of a spouse or partner, catastrophic illness, etc.
- Change in residence may result in declining health or finances. This may also mean loss of a valued possession, pets, regular neighbors, or regular contact with loved ones.
- Loss of independence, such as ability to drive a car. This type of loss can be significant as you-gradually or suddenly-become more dependent on others for help.

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Supporting the Bereaved

- When working with older adults who are bereaved, it's difficult to know the best way to support them.
- Remember, knowing what to say is less important than our willingness to be present and listen.
- Take time to learn and listen about their relationship with the loss and how it has impacted them.
- Consider these suggestions.....

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Initiate conversation and be honest

- Offer support rather than waiting for them to ask for help. Be honest if you are unsure what to say.
- *"I want to be supportive but I don't know what to say."*
- *"Sometimes I want to talk to you about the loss but I am afraid I am going to say something to upset you or make you cry."*

Be sincere

- Many bereaved believe others don't really want to know how they feel when asked, *"how are you?"*.
- Be sincere when asking this and prepared to support them when they share their true feelings resulting from the loss. We do not get to decide how other's grieve loss.

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Listen intently

- Listening is the best way to support someone.
- Be aware of your body language.
- Nod your head or gesture to show interest.
- Summarize what you hear, make sure you understand what they are trying to convey to you.

Be respectful and empathetic

- Rather than giving advice, try to understand what they are feeling and experiencing.
- Be comfortable with silence.
- Stay focused on what they are saying, this is not your time to share, it is theirs.
- Acknowledge how difficult it can be, even if you have never experienced a similar loss or feel the loss is substantial.

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Help with practical tasks

- Assistance with day to day tasks can be helpful, especially after the loss of a person. Many of the survivors are overwhelmed with legal issues and details as well as funeral planning.
- These tasks can include: cleaning, transportation, financial planning and assistance, etc.

Remember the loss

- The bereaved do not want to forget their loved ones, possessions, or abilities lost, and want others to remember them as well.
- Talk about the person or item that was lost.
- Encourage them to reminisce.
- Look at pictures.

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Continue your support

- Mourning is an ongoing process with no specific end point.
- People do not get over their loss, in time they learn to live with the loss.
- Continue to check in.
- Be sensitive with significant dates and trigger points for the person that may bring on overwhelming feelings of grief.

Provide resource information

- Remind those experiencing and coping with loss that there are other supports available.
- These include: support groups, bereavement counselors or individual therapists, and chaplains or church ministers.

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Grieving when Cognitively Impaired

- Older adults with cognitive impairments may have difficulty processing their loss or remembering the loss. When the older adult forgets the loss, they may continue to ask for the person, or to return to their home, etc.
- This can be devastating for such individuals, their families, and caretakers who are forced to repeatedly re-experience their grief.

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How to help...

- If the person asks for information about the loss, gently repeat what you know of the facts, or offer to find out for them.
- Address any other losses secondary to the grief such as a change in residence, etc.
- Support in a calm environment with limited distractions.
- If they become confused or struggle to answer questions, offer reassurance.
- If the person is aware and able in some way to process the loss, allow that to occur, and walk the path with them.
- Reminisce with them.
- Listen for and help to identify feelings of longing, sadness, or fear.
- Listen well, make their reality your reality. Sometimes you will find reminding this person of the loss is no longer a productive thing to do, as we essentially re-traumatize them. If you can recognize they cannot process it long term, join them in their world.

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Bill of Rights for the Bereaved

1. You have the right to experience your own unique grief
2. You have the right to talk about your grief
3. You have the right to feel a multitude of emotions
4. You have the right to be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits
 5. You have the right to experience "grief bursts"
 6. You have the right to make use of ritual
 7. You have the right to embrace your spirituality
 8. You have the right to search for meaning
 9. You have the right to treasure your memories
10. You have the right to move toward your grief and heal

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Comments & Questions

