



# Complicated Grief and Its Treatment

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*A Handout for Patients, Friends,  
and Family Members*

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Based in part on an earlier version with Krissa Caroff, B.S.  
October 2013

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# Handout Explaining Complicated Grief

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## **Bereavement, Grief, and Mourning**

Bereavement is the loss of a loved one. Loved ones are very important in people's lives. People define themselves in part by their close relationships and these relationships help them feel safe. Close relationships affect people in many ways including some they are not aware of in their conscious mind. The importance of loved ones when they are alive is the reason their death affects people so much.

Grief is the reaction to loss and it is different for every person. Yet certain kinds of thoughts and feelings occur predictably. These include feelings of yearning, longing and sadness, frequent thoughts and memories of the deceased, a sense of distance from the world and other people, and a range of different painful emotions. Bereaved people often feel confused about themselves—their identity, what they care about. It can be hard to focus on anything very complex. They may want others around, but it may be harder than usual to contribute to conversation and activities. Painful and disruptive as it is, you can think of grief as nature's way of giving people time and guidance to work through a mourning process.

Loss is permanent and so is grief. However, grief usually changes over time. It starts out as acute grief that is intense and disruptive and sometimes surprisingly strange and unsettling. Over time grief is reshaped into a form that is quieter and integrated into a bereaved person's life. Integrated grief enables people to remember and honor their loved ones, without disrupting their own lives. Mourning is the process by which acute grief is reshaped and integrated.

## **How mourning works**

Acute grief can be so strong that it feels like it is going to last forever, but it usually doesn't. The changes don't happen easily and are often imperceptible, but grief is usually integrated more quickly than we expect. It appears that people have an instinctive process that helps them deal with a painful loss. Instinctive mourning, like acute grief, is a process unique to each individual. The way people cope and the time they need is different for each person. However, there are some things most people have in common. People usually learn to dose themselves with the



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emotional pain. They usually spend some time with the pain, letting it be there, while they think about their new state of affairs. At some point, their minds naturally turn away from the pain. Bereaved people need to allow this break from the pain and even welcome it, allowing themselves to experience positive feelings. The process of moving toward and away from painful feelings helps the process of learning to live with the loss. It helps if there is someone who can share the pain. The presence of other people can help the bereaved feel connected to the present and feel some hope for the future.

People who are very close to each other have a bond that is permanent. Memories of loved ones are stored in a special way in the brain. Right after a loved one dies it seems like this can never be enough. But over time, the deep feelings of connection can become a comfort. People who love each other are not usually together all day, every day. Instead, they come and go in each other's lives, even when they are very close. People's minds have a way of staying connected to people they love even during times when they are apart. Mourning can help bereaved people find a way to use this sense of connection after someone dies to feel connected to their loved ones in a new way.

Mourning is also a process of adjusting to practical changes the loss has created. People have to find solutions to simple everyday things like who will take out the trash, or do the laundry, things they may not be used to doing and may not want to do. They need to find new ways to spend their time, especially if they have been spending a lot of time taking care of their loved one. They may need to find someone new to confide in. Mentally, they need to find ways that they can think about or "re-visit" memories and feelings about the person who died including their death, and rethink thoughts that are highly painful. Making these changes is not easy, but people can feel a sense of satisfaction and even pride, as they begin to figure this out.

## **Complicated Grief**

Having strong feelings of sadness and loneliness, some fear, anxiety, guilt, resentment, anger, or shame is perfectly normal after a loss but people need to pay attention to these feelings



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and resolve them. Sometimes that doesn't happen. Sometimes people continue to feel like they can't accept the death, even though they know perfectly well that it happened. Sometimes they become afraid of their grief or ashamed of it or mad about being so upset. They think of grief as a problem that is getting in their way instead of a natural human feeling to accept and even respect. Sometimes people focus on grief so much they stop caring about themselves or their own lives. Sometimes sorrow and yearning seem very strong and stubborn, and a person can't imagine ever being happy again. Another way of saying this is that the person is "stuck" in acute grief and mourning is derailed.

We call this situation "complicated grief". In medicine a complication is something that gets in the way of a healing process. Think of losing a loved one as something like a serious injury and grief as like the painful inflammation that occurs with the wound. Mourning is like the healing process in which the pain and inflammation eventually lessen. A wound complication such as an infection can make the inflammation and pain worse and get in the way of healing. Likewise, certain kinds of thoughts, feelings and behaviors can make the pain of acute grief worse and get in the way of mourning. Once this happens it can be very difficult to find your way out of it alone.

## Grief Complications

In order to heal, people need to wrestle with how to understand that a loved one is gone and what the loss means to them. They need to find ways to stay connected to their loved one and also ways to live their own lives in a meaningful way without their loved one. People's minds automatically start to do this when someone dies, often without our quite realizing it. But people can get in the way of themselves. You might know the term "Monday morning quarter-backing". It is something people do very naturally when something happens that they wish they could have prevented. If you are a coach and your job is to help your team do better in the next game, it is a useful thing to do. But it is not so useful if you are trying to deal with the loss of a loved one or anything else over which you have no control, and which you cannot change. If a person looks back and thinks about what could have been different "if only \_\_\_\_\_" (you can fill in the blank) it is not helpful. In fact, the more bereaved people do this kind of second guessing, the more they are telling their brain that maybe this death didn't have to happen, and this can be a signal to put the mourning process on hold. "If only" thinking is one kind of common grief complication.

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Another common problem is excessive avoidance of reminders of the death. It's natural to want to stay away from pain. The world is full of painful reminders and bereaved people do need to dose themselves with the pain. But they also need to learn what the loss means to them and one of the best ways to do that is to do things that they used to do with the person who died. They need to strike a balance between doing these painful things and trying new things that might not have so many reminders. If they find a good balance they end up gradually doing more and more. Widespread avoidance can block the mourning process. The feelings associated with painful experiences will not go away just by avoiding or ignoring them. Instead, they remain in your mind - a little like land mines in a battlefield, buried under the surface, but still active. If they are triggered, the intense emotions "explode out" and people end up having to use more and more energy trying to make sure this doesn't happen. In addition, there is usually some ongoing tension from knowing that these feelings are present under the surface. This tension, combined with the unpredictable outpouring of emotions, means that hidden feelings can have a big affect on people's lives.

*A Poem that Expresses How a Lot of People with Complicated Grief Feel:*

*Anger*

*Don't tell me that you understand,  
Don't tell me that you know.  
Don't tell me that I will survive,  
How I will surely grow.*

*Don't tell me this is just a test,  
That I am truly blessed,  
That I am chosen for this task,  
Apart from all the rest.*

*Don't come at me with answers  
That can only come from me,  
Don't tell me how my grief will pass  
That I will soon be free.*

*Don't stand in pious judgment  
Of the bonds I must untie,  
Don't tell me how to suffer,  
And don't tell me how to cry.*

*My life is filled with selfishness,  
My pain is all I see,  
But I need you, I need your love,  
Unconditionally.*

*Accept me in my ups and downs,  
I need someone to share,  
Just hold my hand and let me cry,  
And say, "My friend, I care."*

*- By Joanetta Hendel*