



Grief, Loss, and Bereavement

Fact Sheet #1: Defining Grief

Introduction to the Fact Sheet Series: Grief, whether in response to the death of a loved one, or to a significant life change, is a universal human experience. However, our reactions can vary widely depending on numerous factors. The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences have challenged us in many ways, causing significant loss of lives, livelihoods, social and physical connectedness, our usual ways of life, and how we experience death, grief, and mourning. Aspects of COVID-19 have made the grieving process increasingly difficult, causing disruptions in mourning and other important rituals to mourn the deceased.

Mental health professionals and school mental health personnel often do not receive intensive training on helping patients manage grief, loss, and bereavement, particularly grief related to situations seen during this pandemic. This series of fact sheets, developed by the MHTTC



Network, is designed to help mental health professionals and school mental health personnel support patients, students, and families who may be experiencing grief at any time, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this series, we define grief, differentiating normative or uncomplicated grief from prolonged or complicated grief. We discuss differences in grief reactions based on developmental level and describe differences in cultural expressions of grief. Finally, we highlight the evidence-based treatments for managing grief and provide resources for additional support.

Defining Grief

Defining Bereavement and Grief

Bereavement refers to the period of mourning and grief following the death of a loved one. There is no specific timeline for the period of bereavement. Grief is the emotional, cognitive, functional, and behavioral reactions a bereaved person might experience as a result of a loss.¹

What is Anticipatory Grief?

While the death or loss of a loved one can happen unexpectedly, there are also times that we expect or anticipate a loss to occur. The grief individuals and families experience in anticipation of an expected loss is referred to as anticipatory grief. Anticipatory grief is a natural process in



response to a significant impending loss or death that impacts an individual diagnosed with a terminal illness as well their loved ones and caregivers.² Anticipatory grief can provide an opportunity for individuals, families, and caregivers to prepare for death and make necessary adjustments for the expected loss.³

What is Normal or Uncomplicated Grief?

Grief is a natural reaction in response to the death of a loved one or to a significant life change. Though grief is very difficult to navigate, it helps to recognize that it is natural and can be useful. Individual responses to grief are influenced by a myriad of factors including personality, life experiences, social context, cultural practices, and the symbolic magnitude of the loss. The experience of normative grief can be a relatively slow and uneven process with significant fluctuations in emotion. While most individuals are resilient in their grieving process and do not require specialized interventions, a subset will struggle with their grief and may develop prolonged or complicated grief reactions.⁴

What is Prolonged or Complicated Grief?

Prolonged grief disorder or complicated grief is distinct from the normal grieving process.⁵ It is characterized by difficulty accepting death, traumatic distress, pervasive yearning for the deceased, intense longing for and a preoccupation with memories of the deceased, extreme anger, and feelings of emptiness. Approximately 7 to 10% of bereaved individuals experience prolonged grief. Risk factors for complicated grief include history of mood or anxiety disorders, experience of multiple losses, history of adverse life events, poor health, lack of social support, and concurrent life stress.^{1, 6}



While complicated grief and depression may share some symptoms, they are distinctly different. Complicated grief is characterized by a pervasive yearning for the deceased loved one and a preoccupation with memories of the loved

one. In addition, difficulties can be described as fluctuating between experiencing positive or helpful emotions, and negative or unhelpful emotions. In contrast, for individuals with depression, feelings of emptiness and despair are often constant. Depression is characterized by an inability to experience positive emotions or pleasure and an overall loss of happiness or pleasure.¹



What is Ambiguous Loss?

Ambiguous loss is a situation of unclear loss that remains unverified and thus without resolution. It is ongoing and without clear ending.⁷ With COVID-19, people have experienced significant losses in addition to death of loved ones, including agency and freedom, in-person relationships, jobs, and our sense of safety.⁸

Summary

The COVID-19 crisis has claimed the lives of many and has changed the lives of others forever. Whether due to a death caused by COVID-19 or loss due to another significant life change, grief is a common reaction during this unprecedented time. Though grief is difficult, it is helpful to recognize that it is a normal and natural response after losing someone or something important. For most who have lost someone close to them, the experience of sorrow and loss will linger, but eventually becomes tolerable within a few weeks to months. When grief does not resolve or becomes maladaptive, this is called complicated grief. Complicated grief can be diagnosed as prolonged grief disorder and may require evaluation and/or treatment by a mental health professional.



Resources

- [American Counseling Association: Grow, Connect, Empower! Toolkit](#)
- [American Psychological Association: New Paths for People With Prolonged Grief Disorder](#)
- [Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies: Bereavement](#)
- [Association for Death Education and Counseling: Grieving the Loss of Living our Lives](#)
- [Great Lakes MHTTC: Using the Lens of Ambiguous Loss to Treat COVID-19 Pandemic Fear and Anxiety](#)
- [Grief is a Journey: Finding Your Path Through Loss](#)
- [Hospice Foundation of America: Complicated Grief in the COVID-19 Era](#)
- [Hospice Foundation of America: Disenfranchised Grief and COVID-19](#)
- [MHTTC Network: Strategies for Addressing Trauma, Crises and Grief Through Tele-Mental Health](#)
- [National Alliance for Grieving Children: Through the Lenses of Grief](#)
- [National Association of Social Workers, Connecticut Chapter: Grief and Mourning During COVID-19 Virtual Zoom Webinar](#)
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Childhood Traumatic Grief: Information for Mental Health Providers](#)



Resources (cont.)

[National Child Traumatic Stress Network: Childhood Traumatic Grief: Information for Pediatric Providers](#)

[National Hispanic and Latino MHTTC: Communicating Death and Dying to Latino Families during a Pandemic](#)

[National Hispanic and Latino MHTTC: Complicated Grief: Cultural Considerations When Working with Loss in Hispanic and Latino Students and Their](#)

[Northwest MHTTC: Ambiguous Loss: Grieving in the Time of COVID-19, Followed by Live Q&A Session](#)

[On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss](#)

[Pacific Southwest MHTTC: Crisis Readiness, Response, and Recovery Webinar Series #1: Principles of Commemoration and Memorialization](#)

[Pacific Southwest MHTTC: Crisis Readiness, Response, and Recovery Webinar Series #2: Supporting Grieving Students During a Pandemic](#)

[Pacific Southwest MHTTC: School Mental Health Crisis Leadership Lessons: Voices of Experience from Leaders in the Pacific Southwest Region](#)

[Resilient Grieving: Finding Strength and Embracing Life After a Loss That Changes Everything The Center for Complicated Grief at Columbia University: Webinars](#)

Please visit the [MHTTC COVID-19 Grief, Loss and Bereavement Webpage](#) for additional resources, webinars, and training toolkits.

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