

Grief, Loss, and Complicated Grief

Grief is a natural response to loss. While many people gradually adapt to loss over time, some experience grief that becomes prolonged or overwhelming. This leaflet provides general information about grief, loss, and complicated grief, and how they are understood in psychiatric care.

Understanding Grief

Grief is the emotional response to losing someone or something important.

Loss may include:

- Death of a loved one
- Relationship breakdown
- Loss of health or independence
- Loss of work, role, or identity

Grief affects people differently and does not follow a fixed pattern.

Common Experiences in Grief

Grief may involve a range of emotional and physical experiences, such as:

- Sadness or tearfulness
- Yearning or longing
- Anger or frustration
- Guilt or regret
- Numbness or shock
- Changes in sleep or appetite
- Difficulty concentrating

These experiences can fluctuate and often come in waves.

There Is No “Right” Way to Grieve

Grief:

- Is personal and individual

- May look different across cultures and families
- Can change over time

Comparing grief responses can increase distress rather than help recovery.

The Course of Normal Grief

For many people:

- Intensity of grief gradually lessens
- Ability to function slowly improves
- Memories become less painful over time

This does not mean forgetting the loss or no longer caring.

What Is Complicated Grief?

Complicated grief (sometimes called prolonged grief) occurs when:

- Grief remains intense and disabling over time
- Daily functioning does not gradually improve
- The person feels “stuck” in grief

This is not a failure to grieve “properly”, but a condition that may benefit from additional support.

Signs That Grief May Be Complicated

Signs may include:

- Persistent, intense longing or preoccupation with the loss
- Difficulty accepting the loss
- Avoidance of reminders or, conversely, inability to engage with life
- Ongoing emotional pain that does not ease with time
- Significant impairment in daily functioning

Not all prolonged grief is complicated grief; assessment is important.

Grief, Depression, and Anxiety

Grief can overlap with:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Trauma responses

Distinguishing these experiences requires careful clinical assessment.

Support and Treatment

Support for grief may include:

- Time and social support
- Psychological therapies focused on grief processing
- Support for sleep, routine, and functioning
- Medication where appropriate for co-occurring conditions

Treatment is individualised and paced sensitively.

Grief and Work

Grief may temporarily affect:

- Concentration
- Energy
- Emotional regulation

Supportive workplace adjustments and gradual return to usual capacity are often helpful.

When to Seek Professional Help

Professional support is recommended if:

- Grief feels overwhelming or unchanging
- Daily functioning remains significantly impaired
- You feel isolated or unsafe
- Symptoms worsen over time

Seeking help is a sign of care for yourself, not weakness.

Summary

Grief is a natural response to loss, and recovery looks different for everyone. When grief becomes prolonged or disabling, support and treatment can help restore functioning and quality of life.
