

**Bereavement Services**

## 10 Things you need to Know about Grief

**1. Grief doesn't start the moment someone dies**

When a family receives the news of a serious or life-threatening illness, patients and their loved ones are confronted with a mix of reactions that is sometimes called *anticipatory grief*. In reality, it is hard to pinpoint exactly when grief begins. It may reach all the way back into childhood, to the very first awareness that you and your loved ones will not live forever. With every subsequent illness, including a terminal diagnosis or admission to hospice we are confronted with the prospect of loss.

***What to do about it*** *acknowledge all the losses and honor the grief that you are feeling right now. Allow yourself time to absorb the full impact of what is happening. Take steps to comfort everyone who is struggling to come to terms with the news.*

**2. Grief takes longer than you think** Despite what you might hear in the media or popular culture there is no timeline for grief. In fact, it dishonors the depth and length of a relationship to suggest that you should *let go, move on* or *be over it* in six to twelve months. Death leaves a hole in your heart that can never be filled. However, it is important to remember that grief changes over time. The depth of loss you feel right now will be tempered by focusing on the bond that endures beyond death.

***What to do about it*** *Try not to worry about the future. Focus on the practical ways to cope with the moment at hand. Take it one step, one day at a time.*

**3. Grief is not a process** Contrary to popular belief, there are no stages that a person should or must pass through in order successfully resolve their grief. Negotiating through all of the stresses of life at a time when you are emotionally distressed rarely proceeds in an orderly and predictable way.

***What to do about it*** *Stop judging yourself because your grief doesn't look like someone else's. Allow your grief to unfold naturally and trust in your ability to adapt to the difficulties of life.*

**4. Every person's experience of grief is unique** Remember that every person in the family has their own temperament and personality. They also have their own set of life stressors and their own relationship with the person who is threatened with this terminal diagnosis. We get into trouble when we make the assumption that everyone in the family will grieve in the same ways.

***What to do about it*** *Be patient with each other. Don't judge. Allow everyone the chance to grieve at their own pace and in their own way. Keep channels of communication open and try to be supportive of everyone involved.*

**5. Additional stressors will make grief more difficult** Perhaps you or another family member has recently lost a job or one of your adult children in going through a divorce. Maybe the kids are having a hard time at school or the responsibility of caring for another elderly parent now fall upon your shoulders. All of these other life stressors happen at a time when you have less emotional energy to deal with any of them.

***What to do about it*** *Remember to take time out for yourself and take advantage of all of the stress reducing techniques that you can think of; eat right, exercise, rest as much as you can. Ask for help. Remember that you cannot give what you do not have. Take time to recharge your batteries.*

## **6. Sometimes you cannot be there when they die**

Ideally, we would all like to have a peaceful, Hollywood type of ending. The truth of the matter is, no one can accurately predict or control the time of death. Sometimes a loved one will die in the middle of the night. Sometimes they wait until the moment you step out of the room. With family and friends spread out across the country, realistically loved ones are not always able to be there at the time of death. Sometimes family members are left with feelings of guilt and regret for not being present at the exact moment of death.

***What to do about it*** *Don't wait to tell your loved one how you feel. If for some reason you are not there when your loved one dies, accept that life (and death) seldom happens the way we plan. If you are left with regrets, seek the help of a counselor who can provide you with resources to address unresolved issues.*

**7. It is important to publicly acknowledge a life/loss** occasionally for privacy or for other reasons a patient or a family may decide to forgo a public funeral or to delay a memorial service for an extended period of time. When this occurs, family and friends are denied the consolation of the larger community. Rituals serve multiple purposes, chief among them is that they help facilitate acceptance of the reality of the loss. Without some form of public acknowledgement, healing for loved ones may be delayed.

***What to do about it*** *Find some way to balance these competing values and find some way to memorialize your loved one in a timely manner.*

**8. You may be disappointed by a lack of support** Death is an uncomfortable subject and sometimes people will avoid the subject completely or say stupid and insensitive things. Friends may not always be able to be there in your time of need. If your spouse has not experienced a similar type of loss, they may not be able to relate to how you feel. As time passes people return to the business of their daily lives and forget that you are still grieving.

***What to do about it*** *Be your own best advocate. Tell people what you need and be specific. Realize that not everyone is comfortable with grief but that does not mean that they don't care. Seek out alternative sources of support.*

**9. Anticipate certain things** Grief affects the entire person, body mind and spirit. Although every person's experience will be unique, you can expect that grief can manifest in your life in many different ways. Some people experience headaches and heart aches, changes in appetite and sleeping patterns. You may feel anxious, depressed, disoriented or, confused. It is also not uncommon for people to experience spiritual distress or question their long-held religious beliefs.

***What to do about it*** *Typically all of these symptoms will dissipate as time passes. See your primary care physicians if you have any questions or concerns about your personal health.*

**10. You are not alone** In addition to your friends and family members; do not forget that there are many other resources you can call upon in times of need. NorthShore Hospice sponsors grief support groups and grief counseling at no charge to the family, friends and caregivers of NorthShore Hospice patients.

***What to do about it*** *Contact NorthShore Hospice Bereavement Support Services at 847.982.4364.*