

Anticipatory Grief in Family/Caregivers

What Is Anticipatory Grief?

Anticipatory grief, or pre-loss grief, is a common experience you can have when you learn about a loved one's serious or life limiting illness. It is normal and can feel a lot like the grief that happens after death, such as sadness, anger, and depression. Being aware of how you feel does not mean you are giving up or lacking faith. It allows you to accept what is going on and prepare for a death.

Some common anticipatory grief experiences may include:

- Loss of your routine and sense of control
- Changes in your loved one's ability to take care of self
- Loss of your social life or being away from your family and friends
- Not being able to do the hobbies or activities you enjoy
- Changes in your faith or the way you view the world
- Changes to your plans and dreams
- Changes in your roles and responsibilities
- Less time for yourself
- Dealing with uncertainty
- Fear of loved one's death

Anticipatory Grief Reactions

Pre-loss grief is similar to post-loss grief. You may experience mixed reactions of hope, relief, deep sorrow, and acceptance of loss.

Grief is a natural reaction to any change or loss in your life. It is a painful experience, but it is a normal reaction. You may feel many different reactions during this time. These may include:

- Physical reactions such as appetite and sleep changes, crying, headaches, nausea, or feeling tired.

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

- Emotional reactions such as feelings of denial, anxiety, fear, helplessness, disbelief, feeling overwhelmed, feeling misunderstood, missing the life you once had, sadness, anger, guilt, irritability, loneliness or loss of control.
- Mental reactions such as feeling forgetful, confused, or having difficulty making decisions. It is normal to think about what your loved one's death will be like or how you will live without them.
- Social reactions, for example, your relationships may change. You may be sad that your family or friends are unable to support you as much as you had hoped. You may also feel overwhelmed dealing with family stress.
- Spiritual reactions are common. You may question your faith or change your beliefs, or you may find your spiritual beliefs and practices a source of strength and comfort.

How can I cope with Anticipatory Grief?

Grief is a normal reaction to loss and often comes in waves of emotions. Losing a loved one can be very difficult. Learning to adjust to your loss is a process that will take time and various ways of coping.

- **Self Care:** It is important to take care of yourself. It may help you to learn ways to deal with your sadness and stress. Try to eat a healthy diet and take time to rest. You may need to change what was "normal" for you before and focus on what is important to you at this time.
- **Use your resources:** professional and personal. It is okay to cry and seek support from your family and friends. Many times people want to help, but do not know what to do. Have a list ready of tasks that need to be done, so others can choose how to help you.
- **Focus on what is most important and on the quality of life for your loved one.**

It may help to talk openly with your loved one and with your other family members. Talk to your loved one about their health care wishes. This will help you know what is most important to them. You may also find it helpful to talk with your chaplain or clergy, doctor, nurse, or social worker. They can help you learn how to manage your feelings, answer your questions and give you information on resources to help meet your needs.