

The Independence of Grief



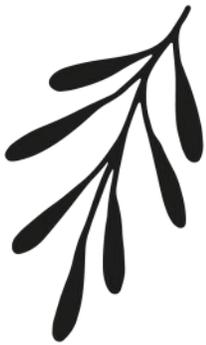
Grief can seem to have a life of its own, independent of your hopes or expectations. Similar to a volcano, it can have a dormant state as well as an active state, and even when not consciously felt, it is there within you. While often thought of as occurring only after the death of a loved one, grief can be experienced in a profound way as soon as changes start to occur. Many people can pinpoint the beginning of their grief journey to the time of a serious diagnosis. They realize it is present even as their loved one is seeking a cure, as though starting to prepare for the many losses ahead.

Along the way, grief can manifest in ways that catch us off guard, such as fatigue, tearfulness, irritability, difficulty concentrating, loss of interest in activities, difficulty sleeping, increased sleep, restlessness, and change in appetite.

Dealing with grief starts with naming and recognizing it. In doing so, you begin to feel a little more in control. Part of grief's independence is its ability to appear when you least expect it; at a special family function, while performing routine home tasks or driving in your car. You may be energized to keep active as you try to stay one step ahead of it. Perhaps you tend to withdraw from people you normally enjoy. You may be more sensitive to the emotions of those around you.

Many describe their grief as being like a roller coaster or like waves in the ocean. Just when you think you are doing a little better, another memory or reminder takes you by surprise and you once again feel "thrown" into the depths of grief. What's important to remember is that "this too shall pass" and, in time, there will be more good moments and fewer painful ones.

Grief impacts not only your emotions, but also your mind, body and spirit. Try as you might, it's hard to avoid. It demands to be recognized and worked through because that's what helps



you discover some relief. Your grief is comprised of all the reactions you have in response to loss. Although people tend to use the terms grief and mourning interchangeably, mourning is the process involved in how you adapt to the loss—what you do with your grief reactions. Be aware of what seems most helpful to you during this difficult time. Think about what has helped you cope with difficult times in the past. Try to set aside any expectations you have about how you "should" be grieving. So rather than block out or ignore them, find healthy ways to express your feelings as they arise. Let family members and friends know what you need. Many are surprised how helpful it can be to attend a hospice support group.

Your feelings are normal even though it doesn't seem like it. Know that you are more resilient than you feel; you will get through this difficult time. Moving toward the pain of loss may not be easy, but it is the path toward healing and growth. So be patient with yourself and the seemingly independent nature of your grief. It is difficult to allow yourself to feel what you may have spent time trying to avoid. Try to trust that if you feel the sorrow of grief, you will, in time, come to know joy again.

—Patti Anewalt, PhD, LPC, FT, Director, Pathways Center for Grief & Loss