



Anticipatory grief: how to prepare for what is ahead

What is anticipatory grief?

For some people grieving can start long before someone has died. This is known as anticipatory grief or pre-bereavement.

We notice feelings of loss as we witness someone's health deteriorate and elements of what makes this person unique and special begin to slowly fade. Our relationship with them can change too. It is normal and natural to experience feelings of loss even when someone is newly diagnosed as well as being ill for a long time.

The emotions we feel at this early stage can mirror the same emotions we feel when someone has died, such as overwhelming sadness and sorrow, anger, fear, confusion, forgetfulness, and isolation. Anticipatory grief is not just about preparing for the loss associated with death, but for the many losses already occurring as an illness progresses.

Watching someone we care about slowly or quickly deteriorate can have a significant effect upon us physically and emotionally. We can feel excessive tiredness, be running on high alert and feel deep sadness as we witness the person's body and mind deteriorate. Bearing witness to someone die can take all the physical and emotional strength we have.

This can be a very tough time. Therefore, when our loved ones die, we feel a mixture of relief that their suffering has ended and deep sadness that they are no longer alive. Anticipatory grief and the feelings that we experience immediately after the death are all normal and acceptable.

What may help?

Allow yourself to acknowledge that although the person hasn't died, you *are* grieving.

Anticipatory grief is common among caregivers as well as others, but unfortunately when all your time is consumed with caregiving you may feel totally alone, isolated, and exhausted. Connecting with others through support lines or online support can help.

Try hard to make time to connect with friends. Taking time out and finding time to share your thoughts and feelings with others or simply having some distraction will be of benefit.

Explore mindfulness as a way of being present and aware of the many emotions you are coping with. The app **Headspace** can be helpful.

Feeling anticipatory grief does not mean you are giving up. There comes a time where we can start to accept that an illness is terminal, and that recovery is no longer a possibility. Though it is a reality, there can be feelings of guilt that comes with this acceptance. Focus on what you *are* doing – still supporting, caring, loving, creating meaningful time together. You are gently shifting your energy from hope for recovery to hope for meaningful and comfortable time together.

It might be helpful to show or say...I'm sorry, I love you, I forgive you, thank you, goodbye.

Communicate

Anticipatory grief is different for everyone. Expect that everyone in your family may be experiencing and coping with anticipatory grief in different ways. Keeping the lines of communication open can help everyone better understand one another. Whilst you are planning for the remaining time to be meaningful and comfortable, try to include all the important family members and friends in those discussions.