

What Is Anticipatory Grief?

Anticipatory grief refers to the grief experienced when a death is expected. It usually begins with the news of a terminal diagnosis and involves the acknowledgement that the death of a loved one is approaching. This can be extremely painful and difficult to endure. This type of grief is distinct because it is experienced while your loved one is still living. Anticipatory grief can be accompanied by changes in your opinions and attitudes as well as different routines and priorities. You can experience fluctuations in emotions; feeling hopeful one day and in denial the next. Not only are you grieving a loss that will occur in the future, but also the past and present losses such as certain abilities and opportunities.

The knowledge that your loved one is going to die usually comes as a shock and may produce feelings of denial or disbelief. We often try to convince ourselves that the people we love will be around forever and so the reality of death can be quite painful. A lack of control or ability to prevent the death from happening can leave you feeling helpless and frustrated. You may also feel a strong sense of hope. Your loved one is still alive and often, no matter what the odds are, people want to believe that there is still a chance for a cure and survival. One of the most stressful aspects in anticipating a death is the pressure to spend all your available time with the dying person and that time not spent with them will be lost. Try to strike a balance between caring for your loved one with meeting the other obligations in your life.

When a loss is expected, the grieving process can begin before the actual death occurs. You may feel bad for grieving while your loved one is still alive, especially when you have accepted the death and they do not die within the expected time. In these situations it is important to remember that preparing for a death does not mean you do not love the person or are “wishing” they would die. Grieving is an important step towards adapting to a life without this special person. Emotions that you would expect to feel after the loved one dies may also be felt during anticipatory grief. These can include guilt, sadness, shock, denial, anger and loneliness, as well as physical changes such as headaches, changes in weight and trouble sleeping. The experience of anticipatory grief does not necessarily minimize the grief that is felt following the death; there is no fixed amount of grieving that needs to be completed.

It is common for family and friends to become more attached to their loved ones during this time. Anxiety can develop as you begin to realize that you will be separated from your loved one indefinitely and that time is running out. There might also be a fear surrounding how and when the person will die. At times, you may find yourself withdrawing and becoming more distant from your loved one. This can be a defensive response in order to avoid the pain of having someone you care for taken away from you. You may also feel frustrated or angry for having to be put through such a difficult time. It is best to remain supportive while trying to enjoy and maximize the time you have left with the person. Include them in favorite activities; watch a movie or share stories and memories.

What Is Anticipatory Grief? (continued)

Unexpected deaths can come as a complete shock and often your ability to cope is impaired. For an anticipated loss, however, you might have more control over your emotions. This means that while mourning (at the funeral, for example) you might not be as emotional or expressive of your grief as you expected to be. This can be a source of guilt or embarrassment but it is important to remember that certain emotions may have been experienced and worked through earlier during your anticipatory grief. On the other hand, some individuals might still feel shocked, confused or overcome with emotions at the time of death even when it was expected; this is normal too.

Living in anticipation of a loved one's death can provide you with more time to accept the reality of the situation and prepare yourself for what is to come. You have the chance to anticipate the loss of a loved one as well as the changes that will have to be made. This can include making practical arrangements such as funeral plans, financial changes, reassigning responsibilities held by family members and developing new routines. There is also the chance for family, friends and even the dying person to complete any unfinished business, reconcile differences and say their goodbye's or I love you's.

REFERENCES:

- Therese A. Rando - *Grief, Dying, and Death: Clinical Interventions for Caregivers*.
- Robert Buckman - *"I don't know what to say..." How to Help and Support Someone Who is Dying*.
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- Sally S. Roach and Beatriz C. Nieto - *Healing and the Grief Process*

