

You've lost someone you love: Four signs you may need to seek grief counseling

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Grief is a natural response to losing something you felt a bond with. This loss ranges from death to the end of a relationship. It could also be the loss of an election or of a body part through amputation. Grief is natural

and normal. It serves as a [psychological way of buffering you against the shock](#) brought on by loss.

Experiencing the [grief](#) brought on by the death of someone you loved is an emotionally challenging journey. The intensity of your reaction will vary depending on factors like the nature of your loved one's death, your relationship with them and their age. For instance, violent deaths or the loss of a child tend to evoke more profound pain than a death from natural causes or the passing on of an older person.

As a [counseling psychologist](#) who studies trauma and how communities process grief, I believe that understanding the symptoms of grief and recognizing the signs that you aren't coping with loss on your own are crucial for [promoting healing and overall well-being](#).

Symptoms of grief

The common symptoms of grief can be categorized into [four dimensions](#)

Physical symptoms: these affect the biological functions of the human body. They may include a change in eating habits, like overeating or a loss of appetite. You may also experience a general loss of energy and gastrointestinal issues, like constipation and stomach aches. Your [immune system](#) could also weaken, meaning you fall ill easier.

Intellectual symptoms: these affect the cognitive dimension. They include concentration deficits, such as repeatedly performing small tasks to accomplish simple assignments. Confusion may arise, leading to disorganization and difficulty recalling certain things, like the names of children or specific rooms in the house. Making decisions and learning new things could also become challenging. This reaction is a result of the overwhelming pressure and disruption that grief [exerts on the brain](#).

Social symptoms: these include how you relate to others after a loss. Some people may withdraw and retreat from the activities they enjoy. Others may display irritability or mood swings. They may also become more dependent, requiring the presence and support of others even for simple decisions.

Spiritual symptoms: these relate to religious or [spiritual beliefs](#) and values. Grief can lead to you questioning where your God was when your loved one died. You may doubt the power of your God or question the effectiveness of your prayers. These spiritual reactions are an attempt to understand grief by finding new meaning through [looking to a higher power for answers](#).

All these symptoms are normal reactions to losing a loved one. They aren't necessarily problematic. However, grief symptoms can be viewed as harmful if they [present for longer than normal](#) (usually more than 12 months) or if they affect your functionality to a point where you're not able to perform your normal day-to-day activities smoothly.

Signs you aren't coping

People who aren't coping well with grief after losing a loved one [exhibit several symptoms](#). These include:

Prolonged and intense grief: While grief is a [natural process](#) that takes time, an extended period of intense grief may suggest the need for additional support. If your grief persists beyond six months without significant improvement or relief, seeking professional assistance may be beneficial.

Impaired daily functioning: Grief can disrupt [daily life](#), but if it significantly affects your ability to function, it may be a sign that professional help is necessary. Finding it challenging to concentrate on

tasks, make decisions or perform routine activities due to overwhelming sadness indicates you could benefit from grief counseling. You may also need the support of your peers or significant others.

Persistent emotional distress: Feelings of emptiness, loneliness and a deep yearning for the deceased are normal aspects of the grieving process. However, if these emotions become overwhelming and persistently disrupt your daily life, it may be time to consider seeking professional help. Grief counselors can help you navigate complex emotions and find healthy coping mechanisms. These mechanisms include sports, prayer, keeping a reflective journal or celebrating anniversaries linked to the deceased.

Self-destructive thoughts or behaviors: In some cases, grief can lead to thoughts of self-harm or a desire to join the deceased. These intense feelings of hopelessness and despair require immediate attention. If you experience persistent thoughts of suicide or engage in self-destructive behaviors, like using drugs in an effort to numb the pain, reach out to a grief counselor or a mental health professional. This is crucial for your safety and well-being.

Way forward

Seeking professional help doesn't indicate weakness or an inability to handle grief on your own. Instead, grief counseling provides a safe space to express your emotions, gain valuable insights and learn coping strategies that are tailored to your specific needs.

When in this safe space, talk about how you're feeling. This helps you express emotions that you may have earlier blocked. It also helps you access your internal resources, such as resilience, spirituality and positive self-talk. Talking it out also helps get you to a place where you can accept a loss and move forward with your life.

Healing from grief takes time. Seeking help is a courageous step towards finding solace and restoring your well-being.

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