

Grief & Depression Are Intimate Strangers

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The death of a loved one can be one of the most difficult experiences a person faces. For some, the loss results in a long and protracted period of grief—the normal human response to loss. Symptoms of grief include sadness, longing, appetite and sleep disturbances, memory and concentration impairment, and diminished interest in activities. These symptoms are also symptoms of depression. While some bereaved people experience the symptoms mildly and with decreased intensity over time, other bereaved people experience them to such a degree that they qualify for a diagnosis of clinical depression.

We know that bereaved people grieve in their own time and in their own way, but what accounts for the differences?

Social Support

People who are isolated are more likely to be depressed than people who have a support network and someone in whom they can confide. However, the benefits of such support may be compromised by other factors, including conflict. Arguments among family members about settling an estate, for example, may contribute to depression rather than relieve it. Reactions of friends and acquaintances are also important. The widow who says, “My friends tell me its been six months, so I should be over this by now” is more likely to be depressed that the person whose feelings are accepted as normal.

Practical support may be as important, if not more important, than emotional support. If a bereaved person is overwhelmed by legal matters or insurance hassles, having a caring friend who listens may not, by itself, alleviate the depression. Grief can compromise a person’s ability to cope with even the most routine tasks. The friend who comes to clean the house or mow the lawn may provide as much or more support as the friend who lends a shoulder to cry on.

Concurrent Stressors

Bereavement does not occur in a vacuum. For example, in one study of 360 recently bereaved people, researchers found that 3.5 percent were also coping with marital separation, 15 percent did not have enough money to live on, and 8 percent were deeply in debt. In addition, 11 percent had experienced the death of another immediate family member or close friend within the previous six months, 24 percent were themselves seriously ill or injured, and 16 percent had legal problems. The more additional stressors a bereaved person face, the greater the risk of depression.

Coping Style

Everyone copes differently with stressful events. Those who feel helpless, pessimistic, and isolated have a harder time coping. Those who ruminate about their feelings of sadness

and depression are more likely to remain depressed than those who find activities that re-engage their attention and give them a sense of accomplishment. Similarly, people who try to avoid feelings associated with their bereavement have a harder time adjusting. Some activities that people engage in to avoid their feelings, such as drinking heavily or working excessively, can lead to additional problems.

But what about the people who do not seem to have a difficult time coping with bereavement? Early theorists believed that a period of depression was a necessary part of the grief processes and that, if a person did not experience depression, he or she would be unable to reach a state of resolution. However, there are people who do not become seriously depressed following the death of a loved one and are able to accept and resolve their loss.

People who cope well typically have an optimistic, positive outlook on life. They view upsetting events as isolated occurrences, rather than evidence that “bad things are always happening.” These people have confidence in their ability to cope. They may have a life philosophy or spiritual practice that gives them comfort. They are able to make sense of the death, and to find some meaning in it. Many such people report that they learned something about themselves or about their loved one. Many say that they discovered that they were stronger or better at care giving than they thought they could be. People who cope well do not deny their feelings of sadness, but regard them as a natural part of the grief process and express them.

When a death occurs, many people do not know what to expect. They may turn to books, friends, relatives, counselors, and therapists for guidance. As a result of the messages they receive, many people feel judged or criticized for not “doing it right.” Common statements made to bereaved individuals include “You should be over it by now” “You’re just in denial.” “You should put it out of your mind.” “It must be so hard for you.” And “Just try to make happy thoughts.” As if that weren’t enough, many people judge and criticize themselves for failing to grieve according to their own expectations. One woman said, “There must be something wrong with me. My sisters are crying their eyes out, and I just don’t feel like I need to cry.” A young widower said, “I haven’t felt angry yet, but I guess I will at some point, because I read in a book that anger is always part of the grieving process.”

It is important for professions, family members, friends, and the bereaved themselves to understand and remember that everyone has his or her own style of grieving. This style may not match preconceived notions about grief. It is also important to know the factors that may contribute to serious depression in the bereaved. Recognizing depression and providing assistance early can help promote a more positive outcome.