

When Grief Gets Stuck



Grieving is difficult; in early grief many people experience strong emotions and feelings of loneliness, worry and upset. This grieving is sometimes called Acute Grief. Most people find their own way through their grief with the support of friends and family. Some people benefit from talking to trained listeners who can provide some space and time for the bereaved person to process all that has happened. The purpose of grieving is to find a way to stay connected to that person you loved, while being able to pick up the pieces of your life again. We don't get over loss, but grief naturally changes and reshapes in time and finds its rightful place in our hearts. When this happens, it is called Integrated Grief; we still miss that person, we may still get upset at reminders of them or as certain significant dates approach, but we are functioning and have again found meaning in our lives.

However, the work of grief doesn't always progress, and we now know that people can get stuck in their grief. This is not a measure of how much they loved the person who died, or the best you can expect when a loved one dies. When the symptoms of grief remain very intense and get in the way of everyday life, this is called Prolonged Grief (It is sometimes known as Complicated Grief). It is a red flag that some more specialised help may be needed. If we use the metaphor of the journey of grief being like a train journey, then prolonged grief would be the train overturning with its wheels spinning.

Prolonged Grief is a recognised difficulty, but it is not well understood, and bereaved people with Prolonged Grief can be left feeling that they are not trying hard enough to get on with life or that they are looking for attention or sympathy. The truth is that dealing with unrelenting grief is very challenging and no one would choose to feel like this.

Who is likely to get stuck in grief?

We don't know for sure who is going to get stuck in their grief, but we do know some of the factors that can make someone vulnerable to developing Prolonged Grief. These include an unexpected or violent death, a death that you feel could have been prevented and the death of a child. Other aspects also play a role.

What are the signs of prolonged grief?

Prolonged Grief resembles that early acute stage of grief. Rather than changing, the grief remains as intense as it was in the early days of grief. The table gives an example of the difference between a grief that is integrating and a grief that is stuck.

Grief differences


| Integrated grief | When grief gets stuck |
|---|--|
| Pangs of grief lessen over time | Pangs of grief are persistent, prolonged or very intense |
| Acceptance of the death | Difficulty accepting the finality of the death |
| Feelings of longing & yearning are still there, but not constantly | Intense yearning/longing |
| Still having thoughts of the loved one but able to think about other things too | Preoccupation with thoughts of the person who died |
| Able to enjoy the company of others | Avoiding or having difficulty in social situations |
| Able to experience moments of joy | Feeling numb, empty, no joyful moments |



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To die and grieve well wherever the place





What to do if you suspect you, or someone you care about, might be stuck in grief?

Talk to someone who is trained in Prolonged Grief. Our website provides a list of therapists who are trained. These therapists use a way of working that has been shown in several studies to be more effective for people struggling with Prolonged Grief than traditional therapy, but it is not the only way to work with it. You can access a list through hospicefoundation.ie or call us for the name of trained therapists in your area.

Before beginning any therapy, it's important to have a thorough consultation to make sure that Prolonged Grief is the difficulty (Prolonged Grief is sometimes confused with depression). It's also important to feel comfortable with the therapist. Ask for a clear outline of how you'll work together and what the cost will be.

Grief never goes away, but you can heal from grief, even when it gets stuck. You can get to a place where you remember loved ones with love rather than with pain.

Useful Resources

Columbia University Center for Complicated Grief
complicatedgrief.columbia.edu
(click on For the Public tab)

TEDX on YouTube
youtube.com
(search for 'Complicated Grief' TEDX Talk)

Irish Hospice Foundation
Further suggested reading is available from our Thérèse Brady Library,
library@hospicefoundation.ie

Bereavement & Loss Hub
www.bereaved.ie

Bereavement Support Line
Freephone 1800 80 70 77. Available Monday to Friday, 10am-1pm. In partnership with the HSE.

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