

COMMON REACTIONS TO GRIEF

One of the many disturbing aspects of grieving is experiencing a variety of unexpected or seemingly uncontrollable emotions and/or physical sensations. Often individuals who mourn fear that they “are going crazy” or somehow “abnormal” in how they are responding to their loss. It is important for the bereaved to have others validate or normalize these reactions to grief. The following list includes many of the normal responses to the death of a loved one:

1. Spontaneous crying, often at times where there is no apparent trigger. Individuals sometimes are frightened by the unpredictability of tears.
2. Mood swings, where a person’s feelings change very quickly. Feelings may range from intense sadness to guilt to anger to numbness. Some of the guilt may be related to feeling angry with the person who has died for leaving.
3. Disbelief and denial of the loss. Awakening and expecting the person who died to be alive; hearing his or her voice or briefly seeing his or her face; sensing his or her presence.
4. Difficulty with concentration and memory. Bereaved may not be able to concentrate on reading material; may lose his or her train of thought in the middle of a sentence; may walk into a room and forget why; may lose things or forget appointments. This response seems especially surprising to grieving persons.
5. Physical reactions may include tightness in throat or heaviness in the chest; an empty or nauseated feeling in the stomach; lack of desire to eat; difficulty sleeping or awakening very early without being able to go back to sleep; dreams about the loved one; lack of energy, fatigue.
6. Experience as intense preoccupation with the life of the person who has died, including the need to talk about the loved one and the story of his or her illness and death; assuming the person’s mannerisms or traits.
7. Feel awkwardness with others, not knowing what to say in response to: *How are you?* and feeling uncertain as to whether others are interested in the person’s grief. Feeling isolated and uncomfortable in social situations where everyone is expected to be happy and celebrating.
8. Need to review the last days, months or years of the life of the person who has died to try to determine if things should have been done or said differently; trying to understand the “why’s” or “should haves” and feeling some guilt at not having done more.