

## COMPLICATED GRIEF

**All grief seems complicated, doesn't it?** Everyone's mourning has pieces of anger, depression and other painful processes that are considered to be part of "normal" grief. And everyone has to move through their grief at their own individual pace. So how do we know when someone is truly "stuck"?

Complicated grief is defined as "the intensification of grief to the level where the person is overwhelmed, and resorts to maladaptive behavior, or remains in the state of grief without progression of the mourning process toward completion." (Horowitz, 1980)

What are some clues of complicated grief?

- Minor events trigger intense grief reactions
- The person cannot speak of the deceased without experiencing intense, fresh grief
- The person is experiencing physical symptoms similar to those experienced by the deceased prior to death
- Radical changes in lifestyle, including rejection of friends and family
- Extreme guilt and depression
- Self-destructive impulses
- A repeated theme of "loss" in the person's life

What are some of the risk factors associated with complicated grief?

- Sudden, unexpected death that is trauma or violent
- Dependency and/or anger with the deceased
- Prior losses or higher incidence of multiple losses
- Previous mental health problems
- Dysfunctional family history
- Isolation of the person or family

While any type of loss can develop into complicated grief, certain types of loss seem to make mourners more vulnerable.

What are some of the possible complications?

- Unexpected Death; greater level of initial shock, legal distractions, regrets (unfinished business), a sense of powerlessness, twisting reality (If only...);
- Suicide: all the complications of *unexpected death*; plus possible shame ("bad parent" or "bad spouse"), possible social embarrassment, a sense of betrayal;
- Death after *prolonged illness*; the need for re-defining roles and identity of caretaker, feelings of ambivalence and guilt, possible traumatic last moments, and financial drain.

Excerpted from *When Grief Becomes Complicated* by James Fogarty, Ph.D.