

Anticipatory Grief

Grief often begins with a diagnosis of terminal illness. That's why HospiceCare's grief support begins upon admission and continues after death. The feelings of loss you and your family and friends may be experiencing is called anticipatory grief. It occurs on several levels and may affect different people in different ways.

Some physical signs of anticipatory grief might include:

- Heightened fear, anxiety, depression
- Loss of energy and vitality
- Stomach and intestinal upsets, loss of appetite
- Tightness in the chest, dizziness, shortness of breath
- Increase in physical illness
- Change in sleep patterns

Social and behavioral signs might include:

- An increased or a decreased desire for support from family and friends
- Communication breakdown and misunderstanding due to increased tension

Thought patterns might include:

- Imagining the actual event of the death
- A sense of unreality or disbelief
- Worry about finances
- Heightened sensitivity, crying frequently, mood swings
- Uncertainty about the dying process and feelings of lack of control

On the plus side, anticipatory grief can help you prepare for a loss by giving you time to:

- Absorb the reality of the loss over time
- Say goodbye and complete unfinished business
- Reassign family roles
- Adjust to the changes that may occur after the death

What helps people deal with the effects of anticipatory grief? Following are some suggestions:

- Take care of your physical self. Try to get plenty of sleep, eat well and exercise.

- Allow yourself to fully experience the emotions that arise, and talk out your feelings with those you trust. This can be a relief for you and can give the people who care for you a way to be helpful.
- Allow friends, family, coworkers, clergy, and HospiceCare staff to support you through this difficult time. Say yes to the offer for a dinner brought into your home or to do your grocery shopping for you.
- Give yourself permission to say “No” to any responsibilities that can be postponed.
- Be patient and gentle with yourself at this very vulnerable time.

While there are some grief issues that can only be dealt with before a death, such as saying goodbye, there are also some that can only be faced after a death. Giving yourself permission to grieve as you go along will help you manage your grief process once your loved one has died. Because your responses to the death can't be foreseen or understood right now, our grief support will be there to help you navigate the changes.

© 2006 HospiceCare of Boulder and Broomfield Counties

