



Dealing With Expected Loss

Anticipatory grief is the name given to the mix of emotions experienced when we are living in expectation of loss and grieving because of it. Anticipatory Grief is particularly relevant to those who have received a terminal diagnosis and for those who love and care for them. Some may feel anticipatory grief very intensely, while others have very few or none of the following characteristics.

- Thoughts of good times in the past and the value of the relationship between loved ones and patient
- Thoughts of impending death. Some may “countdown” the days until death or become preoccupied with how long they or their loved one has to live.
- The actual death may be “rehearsed” in one’s mind. This may prompt funeral arrangements or saying “goodbye”.
- Thoughts of what life will be like after death occurs (this life or after-life)
- Exploration of regrets and feelings of guilt
- A sense of surrealness and an inability to fit back into the pattern of life prior to diagnosis
- Alternate periods of acceptance and denial. Patient or loved ones may alternate between detachment and feelings of intense bonding.
- Sadness and depression. Some may detach themselves from the experience or from their loved ones in an attempt to avoid the pain of grief.
- “Roller coaster” of emotions surrounding the illness and relationships

Healthy anticipatory grief may be beneficial in completing “unfinished business”, avoiding premature separation, and enabling communication between loved ones. Anticipating death may make some people feel more in control of the situation, regarding it as an opportunity to plan and prepare and to say goodbye in a special way. Premature detachment may cause more turmoil and can be helped with appropriate knowledge and support. Longstanding family dynamics of course play a large part in how people deal with their own impending death or that of a loved one.

There is a very real need to talk to someone about the roller coaster of emotions we are experiencing. This however is not always easy to do, due to a number of reasons which may include trying to remain strong for our loved ones.

Anticipatory grief may not always occur. Anticipatory grief does not mean that before the death, a person feels the same kind of grief as the grief felt after a death. There is not a set amount of grief that a person will feel. The grief experienced before a death does not make the grief after the death last a shorter amount of time. Hope is paramount to quality of life and may even contribute to longer survival.