

Anticipatory Grief

The call. Anyone who has received the call that starts with, “I’m so sorry but I have to tell you something...” knows how this feels. That call that stops you in your tracks, takes your breath away and leaves you feeling as if the world you knew five minutes ago is not at all the world you are living in now. The moment you learn that someone you love has cancer or any other terminal diagnosis can be one of the worst moments of your life. It also begins the process of anticipatory grief.

What is Anticipatory Grief?

Anticipatory grief is a complex, multi-dimensional and unconscious process of an emotional response to the threat of losing a loved one. It can be somewhat like after-death grief but is different in form and duration. It tends to come and go and can hit you at the most unexpected times. Sadness, anger, panic and disbelief are some of the most common emotions people report. Anticipatory grief is not the same for everyone and is not simply after-death grief started early.

There are many aspects of anticipatory grief to keep in mind and be aware of. Some of those include:

- **When some people experience anticipatory grief they feel a level of detachment from their loved one.** They can misjudge their lack of emotion as a lack of love. This is often not true. Detachment before a death is a way that people work through the grief hoping that, “in the end it won’t hurt so much if I pull away now.” This is rarely the case. If you feel you are doing this with a terminally-ill loved one, give yourself some love and grace and talk to a trusted friend or family member about your emotions. No emotion is negative or wrong. They all lead us to a better understanding of life and relationships.
- **Anticipatory grief prepares you** for your loved one's death. Perhaps the time preparing for the death has given you the opportunity to express your love, ask and receive forgiveness, ask questions, spend time together, work through any past hurts and relive past joys.

- People who allow themselves to experience and express anticipatory grief also report a **decrease in abnormal (harmful and dangerous) after-death grief**. It is important to remember that grieving a loved one's illness and death is a many year process. Allowing yourself time now and in the future to grieve is vitally important to your long term emotional health.

Remember that the future can be grieved without relinquishing the past. Take care of yourself always. Give yourself time. Time to cry, time to laugh, time to be angry, and time to simply sit in the silence. Breathe and take another step.

References

1. Parkes, Colin Murray. Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life, 3rd ed. Philadelphia, PA. Routledge, 2001. p. 136, 28, 131.