

Complicated Grief (Prolonged Grief Disorder): A Guide for Patients & Families

Grief is a natural response to losing someone important. Most people gradually adjust to the loss over time, even though sadness may continue. In some cases, however, grief remains very intense and does not ease as expected. This is sometimes called complicated grief or prolonged grief disorder. In older adults, this condition can affect emotional well-being, sleep, concentration, and daily functioning. With appropriate support and treatment, many people can find ways to cope with the loss and move forward while still honoring the memory of their loved one.

Signs & Symptoms to Watch For

Common Cognitive Symptoms

- Persistent preoccupation with the person who died
- Difficulty concentrating or focusing
- Repeated thoughts about the loss
- Feeling mentally stuck in the time of the loss
- Trouble planning for the future

Behavioral & Emotional Changes

- Intense sadness that does not ease over time
- Strong yearning or longing for the person who died
- Difficulty accepting the loss
- Feelings of emptiness or meaninglessness
- Avoiding reminders of the loss or, in some cases, becoming preoccupied with them

Physical & Functional Changes

- Sleep problems
- Loss of appetite or weight changes
- Fatigue or low energy
- Reduced interest in activities
- Social withdrawal

Typical Presentation & Course

Normal Grief

- Intense sadness shortly after a loss
- Gradual adjustment over time
- Ability to experience moments of positive emotion while remembering the loved one

Complicated or Prolonged Grief

- Persistent intense grief lasting many months or longer
- Difficulty returning to normal routines
- Ongoing emotional pain that interferes with daily life
- Feeling unable to move forward after the loss

Treatment Options

Psychotherapy

- Grief-focused therapy
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- Supportive counseling
- Group therapy or bereavement support groups

Medication Options

- Medications may be used to treat associated depression, anxiety, or sleep problems
- Antidepressants may sometimes be helpful when grief is accompanied by major depression

Diagnostic Evaluation

Clinical Assessment

- Review of the loss and grief history
- Evaluation of mood, sleep, and daily functioning
- Screening for depression, anxiety, or trauma-related symptoms

Medical Evaluation

- Medical review to rule out medical conditions that may worsen mood or energy levels

Planning for the Future

Healthcare Planning


- Maintain regular follow-up with healthcare providers
- Seek therapy or support groups when grief remains overwhelming
- Maintain daily routines and social connections

Support for Caregivers & Family

- Listen with patience and compassion
- Encourage connection with friends, family, and community
- Support participation in counseling or grief support groups
- Seek professional help if grief becomes severe or disabling

National Organizations & Resources

- ✓ National Alliance for Grieving Children

 childrengrieve.org

- ✓ American Psychological Association

 apa.org

- ✓ National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

 nimh.nih.gov

- ✓ Eldercare Locator

 1-800-677-1116 |  eldercare.acl.gov

Final Notes

- Grief is a natural and personal process.
- When grief remains intense and interferes with daily life, professional support can help.
- Healing does not mean forgetting a loved one—it means learning to live with the loss while continuing to move forward.