

# Grief and loss: anticipatory grief

Almost everyone experiences loss at some point in life. Grief is universal, but no two people will process it in exactly the same way. Sometimes we can see a loss coming before it happens. Perhaps a friend or family member is suffering from a terminal illness, in which case we might start the grieving process while they're still alive. In a way, we're grieving the expectation of death. This is known as anticipatory grief.



## Anticipatory grief

Anticipatory grief may be felt before a child goes away to college. Others may experience anticipatory grief before a change in job, completion of school or retirement. Losing physical abilities like sight, hearing, or mobility can also trigger these emotions. But, as suggested above, the most common reason for anticipatory grief is the upcoming death of a loved one from a terminal illness.

When a loved one's death is near, you're not only experiencing the loss of a person; you are also facing upcoming changes, like the shift of your role in the family. For example, if your aging mother passes away, you might become a companion and caregiver to your aging father. Financial changes, positive or negative, can affect your life after loss as well. When death is looming, you may also grieve the loss of dreams and what could have been.

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There can be many physical and emotional responses to anticipatory grief.

These may include:

- Social withdrawal
- A lack of focus
- Guilt about the loss
- Loss of appetite
- Restlessness
- Loneliness
- Anger
- Depression
- Dreams in which the dying person appears
- Weight loss
- Trouble sleeping
- General tiredness
- Preoccupation with death

## How to help yourself

The following suggestions may be positive ways to prepare yourself for the upcoming loss:

- **Accept help** – Others are going through the same anticipatory grief as you. Don't be afraid to ask them for help when you feel you need it.
- **Connection** – As you spend time with your loved one (as a caregiver or as a visitor), use the time to strengthen your bond or connection with them.
- **Form a support network** – Create a network of people who understand your grief and will support you as you confront a difficult period in your life.
- **Get counseling** – For some people, professional help is the best way to deal with anticipatory grief and adjust to life after a loved one's death.

## How to help others

The following suggestions may be positive ways to prepare those around you for the upcoming loss:

- **Communicate honestly** – Include family members and loved ones in an honest discussion about the situation.
- **Confront issues** – Try to address (and possibly resolve) any long-standing issues, resentments or squabbles.
- **Look forward as well as backward** – As much as grief involves moments of reflection and remembrance, make sure those around you take time to look ahead. Grief can also involve future growth and renewal.

**Mourning, loss and anticipatory grief need not be experienced alone. Some individuals seek spiritual comfort in this difficult time and find solace and strength in their community of faith.**

**Many individuals benefit from participating in support groups that address a specific type of loss. As always, seek help as needed through your medical doctor or a licensed therapist or professional. Anticipatory grief is real, but there are supports in place to help guide you through the transition.**



### Critical support when you need it

Visit [optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter](https://optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter) for additional critical support resources and information.



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