

## Living with Anticipatory Grief

### **What is Anticipatory Grief?**

We often think of grief as only happening after a death, but grief can begin prior to death. Anticipatory grief is a reaction that occurs in anticipation of an impending loss and may carry many of the symptoms of post-death grief – sadness, denial, anger, guilt, shock, isolation, forgetfulness, and confusion. These complicated emotions are often coupled with the exhaustion that comes with being a caregiver or the stress of being left alone when someone loses cognitive or physical abilities. In advance of death we might also grieve the loss of stability, security, future dreams, our identity, our loved one's identity, and countless other losses. Anticipatory grief includes not only the impending death, but the many losses occurring as an illness progresses.

### **Tips for Living with Anticipatory Grief**

- Accept that anticipatory grief is a common experience. You are not alone!
- Acknowledge your losses. Even though the person is still living, you are still grieving. Find ways to express your losses whether that is through talking to a friend, family member, spiritual or religious leader, or counselor or through journaling, art, photography, physical activity, or other creative outlets.
- Experiencing anticipatory grief does not mean you are giving up. Sometimes when we accept that an illness is terminal and that recovery is no longer possible, we can have feelings of guilt. By continuing to support the person, you are not giving up on them. Focus on what you are still doing - supporting, caring, loving, and creating meaningful time together.
- Reflect on the time remaining. Consider and plan how you and your loved one want to spend time together. As best you can, spend your remaining time together in a way that you and your loved one finds meaningful.
- Develop a support system and be willing to accept help. Caregiving and anticipatory grief can be a long, mysterious road. Assess your support systems so you have a sense of your needs, who can help, and what they can assist with or ask a friend or family member to help you setup additional supports.
- Communicate! Everyone grieves differently. Do not assume others are grieving in the same way. Keep the lines of communication open, seek to better understand others perspectives, and listen and communicate important needs and values.
- Connect with others. Caregivers can struggle as they experience anticipatory grief, yet their time is consumed with caregiving leaving one to feel isolated and alone. Caregiving support groups can be very helpful whether they are on-line or in person. An EAP Counselor can assist you in finding support groups in your area or on-line.



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- Practice self-care. This can be difficult to do but essential for your own well-being and being able to support your loved one. Small acts of self-care can be extremely beneficial. Consider journaling, connecting with family, friends, or support groups, take a walk, take a power nap, ask for help, eat a favorite food, or watch a favorite show.
- Feelings of relief are common. When a death has been anticipated for weeks, months, and even years, frequently there can be a sense of relief when someone dies. Along with this relief may come feelings of guilt. Feeling relief does not mean you loved the person any less. This is a normal reaction after experiencing a stressful and overwhelming time in your life.
- Don't assume. You cannot assume that experiencing anticipatory grief means you will either speed up or slow down grief post-death. Remember everyone grieves differently.
- Consider counseling. Counseling can provide you with support and a neutral person to talk with and assist with creating coping strategies. Many people seek counseling when they are feeling overwhelmed with the feelings of anticipatory grief. Contact EAP at 877-313-4455 for counseling support or for a referral to a counselor in your local area.

**Sources:**

[PDQ® Supportive and Palliative Care Editorial Board. 2020. Grief, Bereavement, and Coping with Loss.](#)  
[What's Your Grief \(wyg\). April 18, 2017. Grieving Before a Death: Understanding Anticipatory Grief.](#)



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