

How to recognise signs of grief

Grief is a natural response to loss, but it doesn't look the same for everyone. While it's often associated with the death of a loved one, grief can also arise from relationship breakdown, loss of health or independence, miscarriage, trauma, or major life changes.

Recognising the signs of grief can help ensure people are connected with the right support.

Grief can show up in different ways:

Emotional responses

People may experience sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, or numbness. These feelings can be unpredictable and may come in waves. Some individuals appear composed or "coping well" externally, while experiencing significant distress internally.

Physical impacts

Grief can affect the body. Common signs include fatigue, sleep disturbance, changes in appetite, headaches, or general aches and pains.

Changes in thinking

Clients may report difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, confusion, or a sense of "brain fog." They may also dwell on the loss, replay events, or struggle to make decisions.

Behavioural changes

You might notice withdrawal from usual activities or supports, reduced motivation, or changes in routine. Others may keep themselves constantly busy to avoid difficult feelings. Increased use of alcohol or other substances can also be a sign of distress.

Social and identity impacts

Grief can affect how a person sees themselves and their place in the world. They may feel isolated or disconnected from others, even when support is available.

What to keep in mind

- Signs and symptoms often come in waves rather than being static
- Often grief is treated as a 'normal response' and support isn't offered
- There is no "right" way to grieve responses vary widely between individuals and cultures.
- Grief does not follow a set timeline and may emerge or intensify over time.
- Not all grief is immediately visible or openly expressed.
- Non-death losses can carry significant grief but are often less recognised.

When additional support may be needed

While grief is a natural process, some individuals may benefit from additional support. Consider offering support when you observe:

- Ongoing difficulty managing daily responsibilities
- Persistent or escalating distress over time
- Significant withdrawal or isolation
- Risky coping behaviours (e.g. substance misuse)
- Expressions of hopelessness or loss of meaning

Supporting your clients, your community, your family

A simple, compassionate response can make a meaningful difference. Acknowledging the loss, listening without judgement, and offering appropriate referral pathways can help someone feel seen and supported.

GriefCare Tasmania provides specialised support for people experiencing grief and loss, as well as guidance for professionals supporting them.

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