

American Cancer Society

Major Depression and Complicated Grief

It is common for people to have sadness, pain, anger, bouts of crying, and a depressed mood after a loved one dies. It is important to know about these normal grief responses so that you can know if they might be worsening into clinical depression. About 1 in 5 bereaved people will develop major depression, a condition that can often be helped by therapy and medicines. People at highest risk for clinical depression include those who have been depressed before, those with no support system, those who have had problems with alcohol or drug abuse, or those who have had other major life stresses. Symptoms of major depression not explained by normal bereavement may include:

- constant thoughts of being worthless or hopeless
- ongoing thoughts of death or suicide (other than thoughts that they would be better off dead or should have died with their loved one)
- being unable to perform day-to-day activities
- guilt over things done or not done at the time of the loved one's death
- delusions (beliefs that are not true)
- hallucinations (hearing voices or seeing things that are not there), except for "visions" in which the person briefly hears or sees the deceased
- slower body responses and reactions
- extreme weight loss
- symptoms lasting more than 2 months after the loss

In some people, the grieving process can go on for a long period of time. This is more common in those very close to the deceased. It is most often caused by attempts to deny or get away from the pain or to avoid letting go. If normal mourning does not occur, or if the mourning continues for a long period of time without any progress, it is called "unresolved" or "complicated grief." Symptoms of this may include:

- continued disbelief in the death of the loved one
- being unable to accept the death
- flashbacks, nightmares, memories that keep intruding into thoughts over time
- severe and prolonged grief symptoms: anger, sadness, or depression
- keeping a fantasy relationship with the deceased with feelings that he/she is always present and watching
- continuous yearning and searching for the deceased
- unusual symptoms that seem unrelated to the death (physical symptoms, strange or abnormal behavior)
- breaking off all ties to social contact

If you or anyone close to the deceased have any of the above symptoms of major depression or complicated grief, they should be discussed with a qualified health or mental health professional. Treatment is important, since people with complicated grief have a higher risk of an emotional illness getting worse and suicide.