

Understanding Anticipatory Grief



Grief is an emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual response to loss. It can include losses other than death. We tend to associate grief with what we expect to experience in the future. But, actually, concerns about loss begin as soon as we recognize the possibility of a loss.

“Anticipatory grief” is the name for these concerns. It is what people experience when they become aware that they will likely face a profound loss. Anticipatory grief means grappling with and grieving the loss before it completely unfolds. For parents of a child with a serious medical condition, feelings of anticipatory grief may arise from the time of diagnosis—or even before there is a diagnosis. The family begins to envision all of the possible losses that may occur. Over time, as milestones occur or do not occur, changes in the child’s condition often prompt new waves of anticipatory grief.

Anticipatory grief can take many forms: sadness, tearfulness, anger, irritability, loneliness, guilt, anxiety, a desire to talk or to withdraw. It may manifest itself with physical problems such as sleep or memory difficulty, headache or other physical pain. Siblings and other family members may also exhibit these signs of anticipatory grief. If the child is not expected to survive the condition, parents may mentally rehearse the prospect of death and the hours and days that would follow. They may engage in urgent decision-making as a way of coping with their feelings or fears.

Anticipatory grief could also take the form of complete avoidance of any or all of these.

Anticipatory grief is not often discussed, so parents don’t always understand what it is that they’re experiencing. Many experience anticipatory grief alone, and feel guilty or ashamed. They worry that they are going a little mad and begin to doubt their ability to cope. Understanding that anticipatory grief is natural, and common, can help the family go a long way toward staying functional and accepting their feelings as normal.

(continued)





Conclusion

A loved one does not need to have already died already for you to seek support—the better the Before, the better the After. Grief support and counseling, whether one-on-one or as parenting partners or family can be very helpful. The resources in the [CPN's Section on "Anticipatory Grief"](#) shine some light on anticipatory grief as something you need not experience alone.