

Autism & Grief Project Fact Sheet



Non-Death Losses

You can feel grief without experiencing a death. Many of life's major changes can cause you to grieve in similar ways that you would after someone dies.

Some of these life changes may require you to adjust to new and unfamiliar situations that cause you to grieve:

- Divorce of you and your spouse
- Divorce of your parents
- Moving to a new house, apartment or living situation
- Job loss
- Change in your support person or advocate
- Loss of a relationship, even one that is not a good relationship
- Diagnosis of your own or a loved one's serious illness
- Loss of a pet or animal companion that is missing from your life because it ran away or is no longer in your home for other reasons
- Loss of a special object
- Loss of a passion or special interest

Feelings of Grief You Might Have

In all non-death loss situations, your feelings of grief are justified. The type of non-death loss you are experiencing can affect your grief response, so different losses can result in different responses.

As with grief related to a death, you can be affected emotionally, cognitively, spiritually, and physically. You may experience an emotional response through physical symptoms such as head, body, stomach, neck, and/or shoulder aches. These symptoms are often a sign that you may not be feeling well emotionally.

You may not be able to identify or explain your emotions. You might also experience emotional numbness or have multiple feelings all at once.

Some feelings you might have include:

- Shock
- Anger
- Guilt
- Regret

- Sadness
- Anxiety

A full list of possible grief reactions is in a section of this portal called, *What Grief Might Feel Like*.

Examples of Major Life Changes and Suggestions for Coping

Divorce of You and Your Spouse

Many marriages end in divorce, but when you are involved, it can feel frightening and lonely. If you are getting a divorce, it is expected to have many reactions:

- You may have an intense grief response.
- Your reactions can be different depending on who asked for the divorce or whether it was a mutual decision.
- You could feel shocked, sad, angry, or relieved.
- You may experience physical or sensory symptoms, regression of skills, or anxiety from the uncertainty of changes that will come.
- Getting divorced means there are a lot of decisions to make, and many things about your life will likely change.
- You may have to think about and make decisions about where to live, who you will live with, how often you see your children (if you have any), how you will split your money and furniture, and a lot of other things.
- Friends and family of your spouse may choose to “side” with you or your spouse after the divorce, leaving you feeling even more alone.

Divorce will likely result in changes to your daily routines. Thinking about all the changes and making these decisions can make you feel worried, scared, anxious, or stressed. Establishing new daily routines without your spouse and children in it can be distressing. If you will move to a different home, you may even miss things such as your daily commute to work, seeing your neighbors, or visiting a favorite store or restaurant near where you lived.

Suggestions to help you cope with grief:

- Keep a journal or diary where you can write your private feelings about the losses.
- Share your feelings with trusted family, friends, and clergy who are ready to provide support.
- Join a Facebook or other online support group or forum where you can share your feelings with others with similar experiences.
- If your grief is overwhelming for a long time and gets in the way of your daily activities, think about asking for professional help from a trained counselor.

Divorce of Your Parents

If your parents are getting a divorce, you may feel an intense grief response. Often, children of divorcing parents, even adult children, feel responsible for their parents' divorce. Divorce is a decision that parents make, and children are not responsible for it. If you are feeling guilty, it is important to remember that it is not your fault.

If you are living with your parents:

- You may end up moving to a different home and live with one of your parents. This might mean you don't see the other parent as often as you do now.
- If your parents are coping with strong emotions such as sadness or anger, it might be difficult to see them show these feelings.
- You might also feel sad, frustrated, or angry about what life will be like when your parents don't live together.
- You could feel relieved if your parents didn't get along while they were together, because your home life may be less tense.
- Even if you are relieved, you might still worry or be anxious about how the changes will affect your daily life.

If you are not living with your parents:

- You may have an intense grief response.
- You might feel a sense of loss because the future will look different from what you may have thought.
- You may worry about how your relationship with one or both might change.

Suggestions to help you cope with grief:

- Keep a journal or diary where you can write your private feelings about the losses.
- Share your feelings with trusted family, friends, and clergy who are ready to provide support.
- Join a Facebook or other online support group or forum where you can share your feelings with others with similar experiences.
- If your grief is overwhelming for a long time and gets in the way of your daily activities, think about asking for professional help from a trained counselor.

Serious Illness

Grief can occur during your own or a loved one's serious illness. A serious illness changes the outlook for the future. It might also result in a hospital stay or a move to a long-term care facility. The person's life expectancy might now be limited.

The response to a serious illness is often called anticipatory grief. The section of this portal, *Understanding Serious Illness*, provides more information.

Suggestions to help you cope with grief:

- Keep a journal or diary where you can write your private feelings.
- Think about the happiest memories you have of them.
- Tell friends or family about them and share your memories.
- Frame photos of them or add some special photos to your phone or computer screen.
- Share your feelings and questions with trusted family, friends, and clergy who are ready to provide support.
- Pray for them if you like to pray.
- Join a Facebook or other online support group or forum where you can share your feelings with others with similar experiences.
- If your grief is overwhelming for a long time and gets in the way of your daily activities, think about asking for professional help from a trained counselor.

Replacement of Your Caregiver or Support Person

If someone who provides support to you leaves because of an illness or a job change, this may require changes that are non-death losses:

- You may need to move to a new home or someone new may move in with you.
- The new person may have different routines or ways of providing care that you have to adjust to.
- You might miss the person who is no longer in your life.

These losses can cause you to have grief reactions, similar to when a person dies. The section of this portal, *How Life Might be Different Now*, provides more information.

Suggestions to help you cope with the changes:

- Ask for help in keeping as much the same for you as possible.
- If you need to move, pack whatever brings you comfort.
- Try to find similarities in your new home or with your new support person.
- Keep a journal or diary where you can write your private feelings about the loss.
- Think about the happiest memories you have of the person who left.
- Tell friends or family about the person who left and share your memories.
- Frame photos of the person who left or add some special photos to your phone or computer screen.
- Pray for the person who left, if you like to pray.