

Maintaining Appropriate Expectations for Yourself in Grief

Excerpted from “How to go on Living when Someone You Love Dies,” Theresa A. Rando, Ph.D., 1989

Most of us are unprepared for the overwhelming response we have to a major loss. Our expectations tend to be unrealistic, and we often receive too little assistance from friends and society.

Depending on your unique reaction to the loss, your grief may bring intense emotions that surprise you and those around you. You may also experience grief in more ways than you ever anticipated. You can expect to feel brief upsurges of grief during anniversaries and holiday times, and in response to other things that remind you of what you have lost.

Your grief will be very individual. It will be shaped by the meaning of your loss, your personal characteristics, the type of death, your support network and your health. **You may have any or all of these experiences:**

- Your grief will last longer than most people think.
- Your grief will take more energy than you would have ever imagined.
- Your grief will bring many changes and will evolve continually.
- Your grief will show itself in all spheres of your life: psychological, social and physical.
- You will grieve for many things, both symbolic and tangible, not only the death.
- You will grieve for what you have lost already and for what you have lost from your future.
- Your grief will entail mourning not only for the actual *person*, but also for all of the hopes, dreams and unfulfilled expectations you held *for* and *with* that person—and for the needs that will go unmet because of the death.
- Your grief will involve a range of feelings and reactions, not only those that are often thought of as grief, such as depression and sadness.
- The loss will resurrect old issues, feelings and conflict from the past.
- You will have some identity confusion as a result of this major loss, as you experience reactions that may be quite new and different for you.
- You may feel a combination of anger and depression, such as irritability, frustration, annoyance or intolerance.
- You will feel some anger and guilt—or at least some signs of these emotions.
- You may lack self-concern.
- You may have “grief spasms” (strong, sudden upsurges of grief).
- You will have trouble thinking (memory, organization and intellectual processing) and making decisions.
- You may feel like you are “going crazy.”

Continued

Maintaining Appropriate Expectations for Yourself in Grief, continued

- You may be obsessed with the death and preoccupied with the deceased.
- You may begin a search for meaning and may question your religion and/or philosophy of life.
- You may find yourself acting socially in ways that are new and different.
- You may find yourself having a number of physical reactions.
- Others will have unrealistic expectations about your mourning and may respond inappropriately to you.
- You may find that there are certain dates, events and stimuli that bring upsurges in grief.
- Certain experiences later in life may resurrect intense grief for you temporarily.

