

## Tips for nurses responding to grief, bereavement, and loss

Nurses can play an important role by recognising and supporting the needs related to grief and loss of people with advanced illness, family members and carers. The following tips are to get you started with recognising and managing those needs.

### What are we talking about?

- Grief or mourning is a response to loss.
- Anticipatory grief is the grieving prior to loss. It can include grief for the loss of identity, the loss of future plans, or loss of relationship.
- Bereavement is the period of grieving experienced by a person in response to the death of someone close to them.
- Complicated and prolonged grief are terms for a prolonged, intense response to bereavement that negatively affects a person's life including their relationships and employment.
- Disenfranchised grief describes a grief reaction where there is no social recognition that the person has the right to grieve or receive social sympathy or support.

### How to recognise grief

Reactions that are common in normal grief include:

- Physical: hollowness in stomach, tightness in the throat or chest, over-sensitivity to noise, loss of appetite, breathlessness, dry mouth, muscle weakness, lack of energy, susceptibility to illness.
- Behavioural: crying, sighing, sleep disturbance, over- or under-activity, absentmindedness, social withdrawal, dreams of the deceased, avoiding reminders, searching and calling out, visiting places associated with the deceased, carrying reminders.
- Cognitive: disbelief, denial, confusion, preoccupation.
- Emotional: anxiety, fear, sadness, anger, guilt, inadequacy, hurt, relief, loneliness.

## How to manage bereavement

Good quality bereavement care includes communicating with the family and providing support to them when the person approaches their death; this can impact positively on bereavement after the person has died.

Formal bereavement support might be provided by a multidisciplinary team of nurses, social workers, counsellors, doctors, and chaplains.

It might also help the person if nurses:

- Recognise that for some people, grief may be accompanied by feelings of relief and freedom along with guilt over having these feelings.
- Acknowledge the loss and the person's feelings and take time to listen to their experience and feelings. When a person is talking about a loss, they may not need answers or advice; listening to them may give the greatest comfort.
- Ask about their main concerns for themselves or others (e.g. children, siblings) and other current stressors (e.g. other losses, caring responsibilities, financial strain).
- Provide information and reassurance about grief.
- Recognise that someone may benefit from financial support at this time. In this case, you can direct them to the Australian Government page on What help there is when an adult dies.
- Acknowledge that the bereaved often are exhausted from caring for the deceased. You can suggest that the bereaved person meets their GP particularly if the GP knows them well.
- Encourage them to identify and use existing or new support networks.

Visit the [CareSearch Nurses Hub](https://caresearch.com.au)

