

# Understanding grief for helping professionals

Exposure to death, and the grief that it may cause, is a universal life experience. Those in health care and other helping professions may be facing this experience daily. This can have a profound impact that is not always acknowledged or successfully managed.

## Professional grief

Ongoing contact with death and loss can lead to a unique reaction called “professional grief.” This grief can be a result of working directly with patients who die. It may also come from being in a role that involves supporting others who have experienced death and loss.

As a helping professional, you understand the importance of grief support for those in your care. But you may not always recognize the need for support with your professional grief. In highly stressed times, it is especially important to notice when you are struggling and respond with self-care. The following may be factors that you are vulnerable:

- + To help others and fulfill your duties, you must keep your emotional reactions in check.
- + Though you don't express your feelings, you still have an emotional response to the losses. This is sometimes called being a “distant mourner.” You feel grief, but you are trained not to show it.
- + The demands of work continue, leaving no easy or natural place for expressing grief.
- + The impact of repeated losses builds up and may lead to “bereavement overload.” Overload comes from having multiple losses with little time to grieve each one as needed.

## Responses

Helping professionals often feel they can't let themselves be affected by a patient's death. But it is unrealistic to ignore or hold back natural emotional reactions. When professional grief is ignored, it can lead to intense and possibly harmful emotions. You may find this response happening on a daily basis during these challenging times. These may include:

- + Misdirected anger at coworkers, your employer, or your family.
- + Anxiety over your ability to be fully present and able to do your job.
- + Guilt stemming from thinking you “should have done more.”
- + Feelings of helplessness and not trusting your ability to help others.
- + Detachment to the point of feeling indifferent and burned out.

## Healthy approaches help support balance

As a helping professional, you give of yourself every day, often in challenging and emotionally taxing situations. To manage this challenge effectively, you must help yourself in the same way that you help those you serve. Doing so will support your efforts to achieve balance.

### + **Allow yourself time to grieve and to feel sadness and other natural emotions.**

If this is not possible at work, you may need to take time off. It can be helpful to do this regularly (if possible) if losses are common in your work. Understand the importance of expressing emotions.

### + **Be aware of situations that will be more challenging for you.**

Some deaths may be harder for you than others. These may be people who remind you of someone or even of yourself. They may be a fellow caregiver. The death of a child or infant in your care can be especially painful. Many emotions can be triggered with a loss that seems so “wrong.” Understand that you may need help to manage your feelings around these types of deaths.

### + **Try for an emotional balance.**

Your emotional involvement will be different for different cases and situations. The key is to not let the balance tip too far too often. Strive for a balance that allows you to acknowledge and support the sadness of another without feeling the same emotion. This can help you do your job without being overwhelmed.

+ **Utilize your support system at work.** Talk regularly with trusted coworkers about your feelings. Listening and supporting others at work helps make it a place where grief can be shared rather than hidden or ignored. If a death impacts a number of people at work, you may find it helpful to have some type of memorial. Sharing stories and good-natured laughter can be a good way to manage grief. Seek supervision if you have a strong emotional response.

+ **Find ways to unplug.** Develop techniques or rituals that help you let go of work at the end of your shift. Consciously signal yourself to turn off ongoing, stressful thoughts about what happened – perhaps a minute of deep breathing before turning off the lights or using a landmark on the way home as a cue.

+ **Acknowledge the importance of taking care of you.** Make room for it in your priorities. It will recharge your batteries and help you manage ongoing grief and loss. This includes getting the rest, exercise, and good nutrition you need to feel well and energized. Use caution with alcohol. Avoid other substances and other ways to cope that could be a problem when done in excess. This could be overeating, shopping or gambling (online).

+ **Be intentional about balancing the stress of your work with positive time.** Schedule time off for relaxation and activities that bring you joy. Find ways to spend time with friends, family and positive people, even if it is just a virtual connection.