

Is Your Grieving Process Too Hard?

For the Therapist or Counselor

Intense grieving over a long period of time is referred to as Complex Grief Disorder or Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder. The amount of time may vary with the circumstances. But if you have a client who is having extreme difficulty coping with a loss after six months, then he or she may be suffering from this disorder. The chart below can help you determine if your client meets the criteria for Complex Grief Disorder. The assessment on the next page can be given to the client to help him/her understand and discuss the specific symptoms.

If you are treating a client with Complex Grief Disorder, you should be aware that there is a well-researched protocol that has been developed at Columbia University to treat this disorder. To purchase a handbook or learn about training opportunities, visit the website of the [Center for Complicated Grief](#).

Symptom domain	Criteria
Separation distress	<i>The client has more one or more of the following four symptoms:</i> 1) Persistent, intense yearning or longing for the deceased 2) Frequent feelings of intense loneliness or emptiness 3) Recurrent negative thoughts about life without the deceased or recurrent urge to join the deceased 4) Preoccupying thoughts about the deceased that impair daily functioning
Thoughts	<i>The client has two or more of the following eight symptoms:</i> 1) Rumination about circumstances of the death 2) Frequent disbelief or inability to accept the death
Feelings	3) Persistent feeling of being shocked, stunned, or emotionally numb since the death 4) Recurrent feelings of anger or bitterness regarding the death 5) Difficulty trusting or caring about others since the loss 6) Experiencing pain or other somatic symptoms the deceased person had, hearing the voice of the deceased, or seeing the deceased person 7) Intense emotional reactions to memories of the deceased
Behaviors	8) Excessive avoidance or excessive preoccupation with places, people, and things related to the deceased or death

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Losing a loved one is always difficult and the healing process can seem slow and painful. Most people notice that their grief “symptoms” start to fade after about three months; and after six months, although there is continued sadness, life has pretty much returned to normal.

If you continue to have extreme difficulties coping with your day-to-day life after six months, you may want to seek professional help.

If after six months you feel that you are still having extreme difficulties coping with your loss, then you should use this checklist to help identify what is going on. Rate the following statements on the scale:

1=Strongly Disagree 7=Strongly Agree

- _____ I have intense sorrow and pain at the thought of my loved one.
- _____ I can focus on little else but my loved one's death.
- _____ I frequently focus on reminders of my loved one.
- _____ I go to great lengths to avoid reminders of my loved one.
- _____ I have intense and persistent longing for my loved one.
- _____ I have a real problem accepting the death.
- _____ I frequently feel numb and/or detached.
- _____ I am very bitterness about my loss.
- _____ I feel that life holds no meaning or purpose.
- _____ I am often irritable and agitated.
- _____ I have difficulty trusting others.
- _____ I find it very difficult to enjoy life without my loved one.
- _____ I have trouble carrying out normal routines.
- _____ I often withdraw from social activities I once enjoyed.
- _____ I frequently experience depression or deep sadness.
- _____ I frequently have thoughts of guilt or self-blame.
- _____ I believe that I did something wrong or could have prevented the death of my loved one.
- _____ I've lost my sense of purpose in life.
- _____ I often feel that life isn't worth living without my loved one.
- _____ I sometimes wish I had died along with my loved one.