

Grief

Grief is the experience one has after a significant loss.

related emotions: sadness, loss, loneliness, depression, despair

What is grief?

When we **lose someone** or **something that is meaningful and important** to us, **we grieve**. **Some grief is shared with others** and **some grief is private and personal**. So it's possible to feel **lonely** and **disconnected** from the people around us, even when we're grieving the same losses. Feelings of grief and loss can **change over time**. While the significance of the loss does not diminish, the intensity of the pain typically decreases as life moves forward.

Why you might be feeling it

When our babies need care in the NICU, we experience a **series of losses** - the loss of **health**, the loss of **safety**, and the loss of **privacy**. We depend on the NICU care team to help our babies survive and heal. So we often feel the **loss of our role as our babies' parent** and **primary caregiver**. Even when our baby is doing well, we mourn the **loss of the birth** and **early life experiences** we wanted for our baby and ourselves. It's normal to grieve these losses.



Grief is the expression of our love for the people and things we have lost.



What we grieve

Some losses are easy to recognize and understand. We expect to grieve after the **loss of a pregnancy** or the **death of a baby**. Other losses are more ambiguous - but they are still losses. For example, we might grieve **a pregnancy that ends too soon, the birth we thought we would have, or the life we imagined** for our baby and family. These losses are real and significant. It's ok to grieve the things we hoped we'd have.

How grief shows up

People think that grief comes in predictable stages. But **grief can often feel disorienting, unpredictable, and “messy.”** Sometimes grief will surprise you at unexpected moments. It’s important to understand that **there is no “correct” way to grieve.** Parents often find that they are grieving the same loss, at the same time, but in different ways. And that’s ok.

Our bodies

- **difficulty sleeping** - or sleeping too much
- **eating too much** or **too little**
- **agitation, restlessness, and fatigue**



Our thinking

- **shock, confusion, and disbelief**
- problems **concentrating, paying attention, or remembering** things
- **ruminating** on and **revisiting** losses



Our feelings

- deep and persistent **sadness**
- **regret, shame, and guilt**
- **anger and irritability**
- **powerlessness, futility, and despair**



Our behaviors

- **avoiding** thinking or talking about the loss
- **using drugs or alcohol** to cope
- **isolating** and **withdrawing** from others



GROWING around GRIEF

Lois Tonkin

People may think that
grief slowly gets smaller
and more bearable
with time.



When in reality, grief can stay
the same size as our hearts
grow bigger around it.



Things that help

- **honoring the loss** of unmet expectations, important milestones, and the plans we were looking forward to
- **finding ways to make new meaning** and **find dignity in the way we parent** our babies in the NICU
- **self compassion** as we adjust to a life that may look different than we imagined
- **taking time to reflectively grieve** the life we had, our identity or sense of self, or the way we saw others and the world before the loss occurred.