

How long does mourning last? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I'm sorta new at this, but I'll give it a shot anyway. My dad died of a massive heart attack just over a year ago. I went through a pretty rough mourning period, but it didn't seem to last very long. My mom is still very much in mourning to this day. I guess my question is: How can you tell if you've mourned enough? And how can you tell if you're avoiding it?

They say the worst is over when the pain stops and the good memories start. But how do I know I didn't just skip to the good memories?

— Distressed Lion

Answer

Dear Distressed Lion,

Although there's no right way to process loss, it's natural to wonder why your experience with grief contrasts with someone else's. Signs of grief, along with the time spent grieving, vary from person to person as everybody processes loss in different ways. However, if grief negatively impacts a person's daily functioning for more than a year, or if grieving becomes more debilitating over time, they may be experiencing complicated grief. In this case, professional treatment is recommended.

Grief is often experienced in ebbs and flows and it's challenging to pinpoint when you've officially moved forward. It's possible that you've processed your grief in a shorter time period than your mom, which has allowed you to remember the happy memories with your dad. However, you also mentioned wondering whether you're being avoidant. It may be helpful to ask yourself if you feel you've grappled with the pain and acknowledged your true feelings regarding his death or if you've been ignoring them. Recognizing the pain and loss associated with death can make adapting to this new situation happen quickly. It's also good to note that accepting and adapting to your loss doesn't mean that you weren't sad enough or didn't mourn enough. It may simply mean that you've continued through your grieving process at your pace and not on anyone else's timeline.

In your mom's case, it could be that she's experiencing a more intense grief called complicated grief. This type of grief occurs when a person exhibits signs of intense grief for over six months, experiences extreme sadness, struggles to focus on anything else, has numbness, withdraws socially, and has trouble maintaining everyday routines. Certain factors, such as being an older woman or losing a loved one unexpectedly or suddenly increase the likelihood of someone experiencing complicated grief. Younger people are more vulnerable to complicated grief as well. In addition, a person may experience grief more severely if they have a history of preexisting mental illness, previous suicide threats or attempts, family struggles, and trouble trusting others. Having a complicated relationship with the person who died may also make processing grief more difficult. In these situations, speaking with a mental health professional may be beneficial to help adapt and cope with grief.

Someone's reaction to a loved one's death may also depend on their cultural values and perspective on death, as well as their distinct relationship with that person. Because you and your mom had unique relationships with your father, your reminders of him may be different and cause different reactions. Reminders may be prompted by any of the five senses, and, along with anniversaries (such as the date of a loved one's death or their birthday), may result in waves of grief. "Anniversary reactions" or responses to reminders aren't necessarily signs that you're stuck in a stage of the grieving process, but may simply be a part of life when someone you know or care about dies. However, if these reactions negatively impact daily life, you may find professional support to be beneficial.

As you continue to adjust to the loss of your dad and the changes that have occurred as a result, taking care of yourself may help. You might find that eating nutritious foods, staying physically active, and making time to do enjoyable activities that relax you are helpful. Experts also recommend limiting the use of alcohol and other drugs, which may hamper your ability to fully process grief. It also may be helpful to talk with friends and family about your experience with grief. Bereavement counseling is also an option. If you continue having concerns with how you're processing grief, consider contacting a mental health professional to learn more about resources and available treatment.

Best wishes,

Alice!

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