Anticipatory Loss

GRIEF · CARING · CHANGE

Anticipatory loss is the grief we can feel before a loss happens, when we know it is coming. It often comes with a serious illness or dementia, but can also come with other big changes ahead. It isn't only about the final loss. It can include grief for what has already changed, what is changing now and what is still to come.

LOSSES ALONG THE WAY



01 What it can feel like

Sadness in advance
Grieving moments before they happen, like a last birthday or holiday.

Worry and dread
Fear about what's ahead, or how you'll cope when it comes.

Guilt
For grieving someone still here, or for sometimes wishing it were over.

Exhaustion
Especially when caring, juggling and waiting all at once.

Numbness or distance
Pulling back a little, as a way of bracing yourself.

Closeness and meaning
Moments that feel precious because time feels limited.

02 When it can happen

- a life-limiting illness
- dementia or memory loss
- a parent growing older
- a planned move or migration
- a separation ahead
- a child leaving home
- a pet's illness
- losing a job or role

03 Helpful to know

Grieving early doesn't mean you love less
It's a natural response to knowing a loss is coming.

Mixed feelings are common
Love, relief, resentment and hope can all be there together.

It may not make later grief easier
Grieving beforehand doesn't always shorten grief afterwards.

Preparing can help
Practical and emotional preparation is linked with coping better.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Grief before a loss was first described by psychiatrist Erich Lindemann (1944). A later review of carers found that grieving in advance did not reliably make grief easier afterwards. Carers with high grief before the death and who felt unprepared were more likely to struggle later, so support during the caring period matters (Nielsen et al., 2016).

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04 What I am facing

Who or what I am losing, or expect to lose

ALREADY CHANGED

CHANGING NOW

STILL TO COME

05 How it is affecting me

0 = not at all · 10 = very much

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Sadness	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Worry	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Tiredness	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Guilt	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Feeling prepared	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

06 Making the most of the time now

Things I would like to say or do together

Practical things to prepare

- ☐ their wishes and plans
- ☐ care decisions
- ☐ paperwork
- ☐ help at home
- ☐ time off work

07 Looking after me

What helps me

- ☐ rest
- ☐ time outdoors
- ☐ talking to someone
- ☐ writing it down
- ☐ time for myself
- ☐ accepting help

One small thing I will do this week

08 Who can support me

People I can talk to

Services or groups that might help

A note of care. Grieving before a loss is a natural response, and there is no right way to feel. If you need support, please reach out to someone you trust or a health professional.

SOURCES

Lindemann, E. (1944). Symptomatology and management of acute grief. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 101*(2), 141–148.

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