

Dementia & Grief

Grief describes what we feel after a significant loss. This loss can be not just after the death of someone close to us but due to a significant change in our life. When a partner, friend, parent is diagnosed with dementia, loss and grief are among the most significant issues you will face. This can include the loss of many things:

- Dreams and plans for the future
- Loss of shared roles and responsibilities
- Loss of intimacy with that person
- Loss of the relationship you once had
- Shared activities and hobbies
- Loss of freedom as you become a caregiver

Ambiguous loss refers to the loss that is felt when a person with dementia is physically there, but not emotionally and mentally present as they were before. You may feel as if you are losing them bit by bit as the dementia progresses. One may feel sadness, anger, resentment.



Tips for handling ambiguous loss

- Ask for support – this may be a friend who can listen to how you feel. Support groups can also be helpful as there are others going through the same experience.
- Eat well, get rest and physical activity. Make time for yourself each day. Stay socially connected as much as possible. Look after your spiritual needs too – singing, meditation, prayer, walk outdoors – whatever gives you solace.
- Try to focus on what the person with dementia can do, rather than what they can't do.
- Ask for help when needed and be specific about what is needed.

For the person with dementia

Grief is also felt by the person diagnosed with dementia. They may experience grief associated with loss of memory, problems with thinking, loss of independence, the loss of the ability to do things that they once did, changes in relationships



How to help

- Encourage them to talk about their fears and frustrations. Acknowledge their grief.
- Ask how they would like to live with their dementia as time goes on and the disease progresses.

When the person with dementia has died

- This will likely feel like the final of many losses. One may feel shock, pain, sadness, relief (for the person who died and for yourself), emptiness, a lack of purpose.
- Avoid making decisions in the early months
- Eat properly and get enough rest
- Give yourself time to reflect and grieve
- Ask for support if needed



When the partner of a person with dementia has died

- This is not the usual course of what one expects, but it still happens.
- What to say and how much detail will depend on the stage of dementia.
- It is a judgment call to do what is in their best interests.
- It is important to acknowledge and support their feelings.
- Be clear and simple when explaining the death.
- They may forget and one has to tell them again.