

How Do I Know If I Need Counseling?

By Linda Lehmann MA, LP

As you move through your grief you may wonder whether you may need the support and help of a grief therapist to help you cope with the loss of your loved one. You might wonder, “Is what I am experiencing normal or am I in trouble?” Certainly not everyone who experiences the death of a loved one needs counseling, but there are some reasons why one might benefit from counseling. The following points may help you to answer the question, “How do I know if I need counseling?”

Your grief doesn’t change. Initially you may be in constant pain and on an emotional roller coaster. But as you move through your grief, it should change. You should be able to look back on your grief journey and see that it has changed over time. This is not to say that you will no longer be in pain, but the pain has an ebb and flow to it.

There will be times in which you may feel that the pain is not all consuming. You will find that you have moments, days, and even sometimes weeks in which you feel like you are on an even keel. If, however, your grief does not change over time, it may mean that something is blocking the normal progression of grief. You may need the help of a therapist to help you discover what is impeding your grief.

Your grief is significantly interfering with your ability to keep up with your daily routine. Early on in your grief you may find that the routines of life may be difficult to accomplish as the enormity of your grief wreaks havoc with your life. But after a few weeks, most people get back into some kind of routine because life impels them to do so. If you find that you are not able to keep up with your daily routine after the first initial weeks after your loss, you might benefit from counseling to help you cope with your loss.

Your self-esteem remains low. When a loved one dies it can be a devastating blow to one’s self esteem. You may wonder why your loved one died and why you survived. You may wonder whether you did everything you could to care for your loved one. You become aware that despite your devotion, your loved one died anyway. You may wonder why your love wasn’t enough. These thoughts may serve to lower your self-esteem, make you feel helpless in the face of it, and feel really bad about yourself.

But, as we move through our grief, most of us come to realize we did everything we could. We come to understand that our loved one’s death was not caused by anything we did or did not do. However, if your self-esteem remains low, you may benefit from counseling to help you sort through why these feelings remain.

You find yourself withdrawing from others or are emotionally isolated. All things being equal, we know that emotional support is key for healing one’s grief. We all need a witness to our pain. There will be times that you will need moments of solitude as you grieve; but, generally, you will need to be surrounded by others who care about you and give you much needed support.

If you find yourself socially isolated or intentionally withdrawing from others, counseling may break through some of the loneliness of grief or resolve some of the negative feelings toward others that makes you may want to withdraw from them.

You are consumed with anger, fear, guilt or any other emotion. It is common to feel a range of intense emotions following the death of a loved one. Early on in one's grief these feelings may be overwhelming as they come in waves: deep sadness, loneliness, anger, regret. However, if any of these emotions, especially anger, fear or guilt, take hold and prevent one from fully feeling one's grief, it may be halted by the inability to work through these difficult emotions. In these instances, grief counseling may be indicated.

You cope with your feelings with addictive behavior. The intense feelings of grief may cause one to want to anesthetize the pain with addictive behavior to ease one's suffering. This addictive behavior may take the form of drinking alcohol, taking drugs, overeating, overworking, and overspending to name a few.

If you find that you are using something to prevent yourself from feeling the pain of your grief, it will not work. The grief will be waiting for you until you are ready to feel it. If you need help to overcome this addictive behavior, you may need the help of a professionally trained grief therapist.

You think of suicide frequently or have made attempts. It is not unusual to long for the loved one and to wish to be with them. Parents often remark, "I would never do anything to hurt myself but if I fell asleep and never awoke that would be OK with me."

However, if you think about harming yourself or have frequent thoughts about suicide, seek help immediately in order to keep yourself safe. Daily thoughts of suicide and an inability to pull yourself out of this kind of thinking means that you are in need of the care of a mental health professional as soon as possible.

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