ANTICIPATORY GRIEF



Alberta Northwest
PALLIATIVE CARE
SOCIETY

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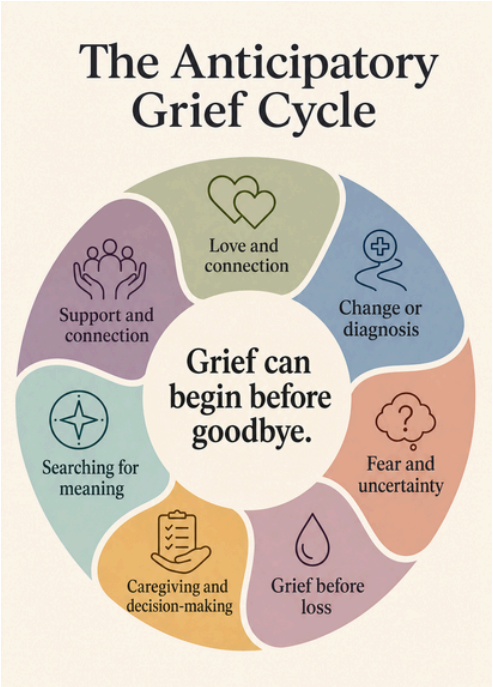
What Is Anticipatory Grief?

Anticipatory grief is the grief that happens before a death or major loss occurs.

Many people think grief only begins after someone dies. In reality, grief can begin when a loved one is diagnosed with a serious illness, starts to decline, loses independence, experiences dementia, or when a family begins to understand that life is changing.

You may be grieving while your loved one is still here. That can feel confusing. You may feel sadness, fear, guilt, anger, love, hope, exhaustion, and even moments of relief. These feelings can all exist at the same time.

Anticipatory grief can affect the person who is ill, family members, friends, caregivers, children, teens, and healthcare providers. MyGrief includes a module called “Grieving before the loss,” which notes there is no one right or normal way to cope with the approaching death of someone.



Reflection questions

- When did I first notice that I was grieving?
- What changes have been hardest for me to accept?
- What feelings am I carrying today that I have not said out loud?
- Who is one safe person I could talk to?

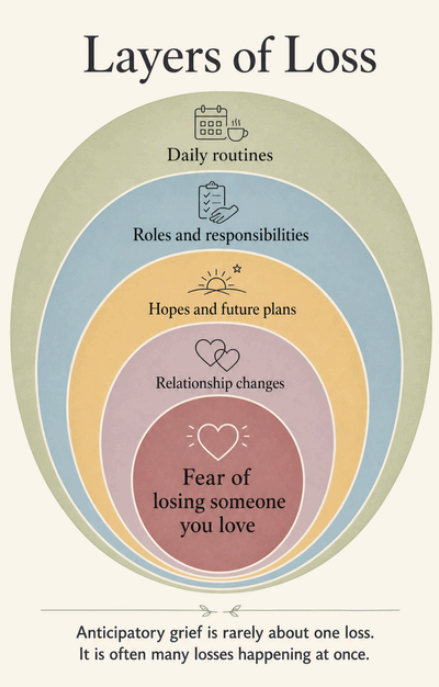
Why Does Anticipatory Grief Happen?

Anticipatory grief happens because serious illness often brings many losses before death.

These losses may be physical, emotional, social, spiritual, or practical. They can happen slowly over time, which can make them harder to name.

You may be grieving:

- The future you imagined
- Changes in your loved one's health
- Loss of independence
- Changes in personality or memory
- Changes in family roles
- Loss of normal routines
- Missed celebrations or milestones
- Changes in intimacy or connection
- The unknowns of what comes next
- The thought of life without that person



Anticipatory grief can be especially difficult because life may continue as usual on the outside, while everything feels different on the inside.

Reflection questions

- What am I grieving besides the possible death itself?
- What part of our normal life do I miss the most?
- What role have I had to take on that feels heavy?
- What future moment am I grieving right now?

Common Thoughts People Have

Many people experiencing anticipatory grief wonder if their feelings are normal.

You may think:

"I shouldn't feel this sad because they're still here."

"I feel guilty for thinking about life after they're gone."

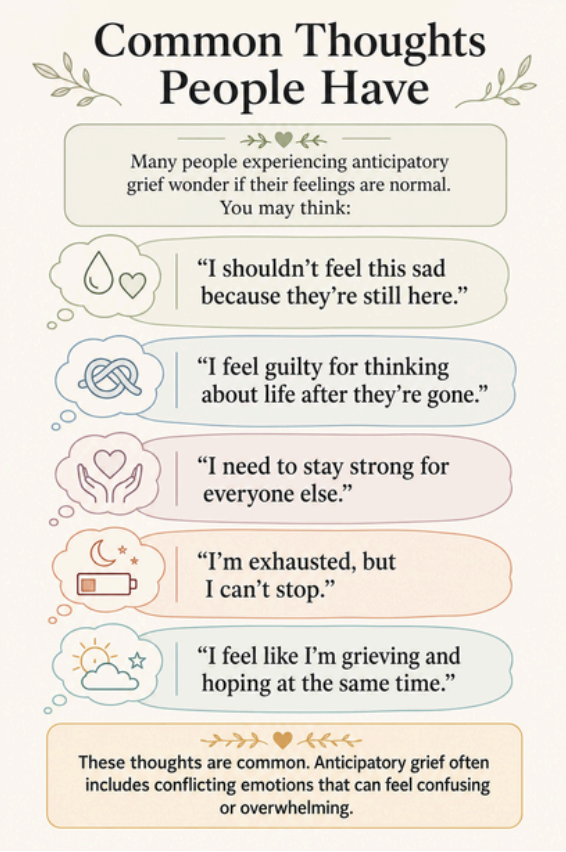
"I need to stay strong for everyone else."

"I'm exhausted, but I can't stop."

"I feel like I'm grieving and hoping at the same time."

These thoughts are common.

Anticipatory grief often includes conflicting emotions that can feel confusing or overwhelming.



Reflection questions

- Where do I feel grief in my body?
- What emotion has been showing up most often?
- What emotion do I feel guilty about having?
- What helps me feel even a little more grounded?

How Anticipatory Grief Feels

Everyone experiences grief differently.

Some emotional reactions include:

Emotional Signs

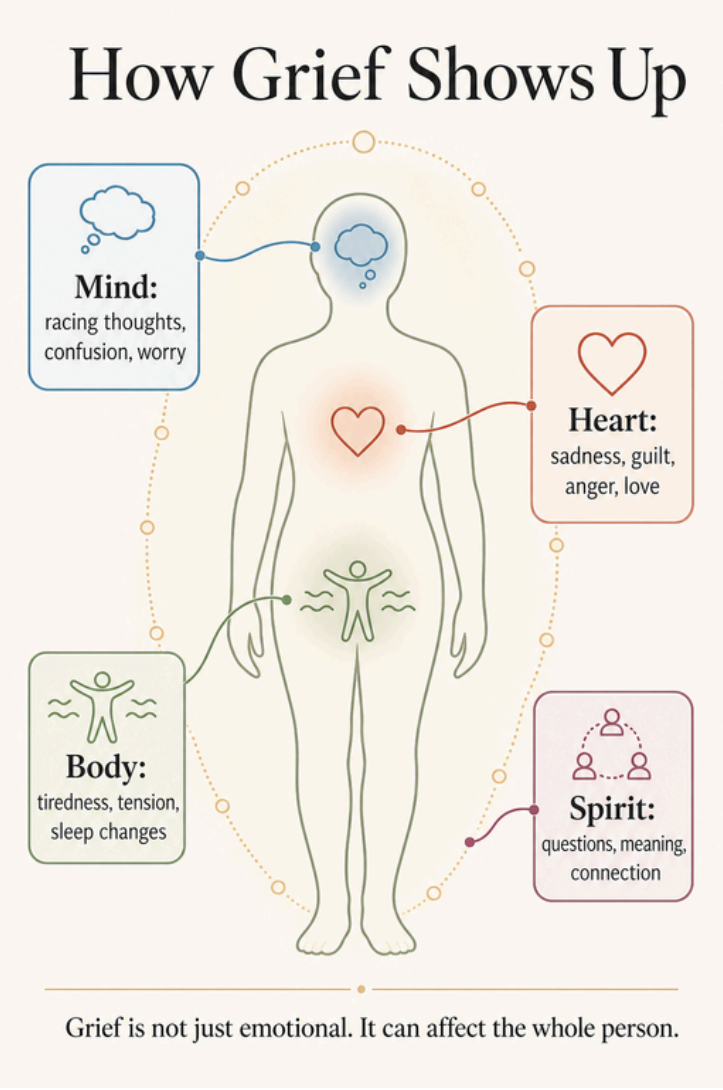
• Sadness • Anxiety • Fear • Anger • Guilt • Helplessness • Loneliness • Irritability • Relief • Numbness

Physical Signs

• Fatigue • Headaches • Difficulty sleeping • Changes in appetite • Difficulty concentrating • Muscle tension • Increased illness

Social Signs

• Withdrawal from others • Feeling misunderstood • Loss of interest in activities • Difficulty making plans • Reduced energy for socializing



Anticipatory Grief and Caregiving

Caregivers often experience anticipatory grief while managing day-to-day responsibilities.

You may be:

- Attending appointments
- Managing medications
- Helping with personal care
- Coordinating support services
- Making difficult decisions

While doing these things, you may also be grieving. This can lead to physical and emotional exhaustion. Caregiver grief is real and deserves attention and support.



Reflection questions

- What am I carrying that others may not see?
- What is one task I could let someone else help with?
- What do I need permission to stop doing?
- What would I say to another caregiver feeling this way?

Anticipatory Grief and Guilt

Guilt is one of the most common feelings people experience during anticipatory grief.



You may feel guilty for:

- Feeling tired
- Wanting the suffering to end
- Thinking about life after the death
- Feeling relieved during quiet moments
- Not visiting enough
- Feeling impatient
- Needing space
- Making difficult decisions
- Not knowing what to say
- Feeling like you are not doing enough

Guilt often appears when love and helplessness meet.
It does not mean you are doing something wrong. It often means you care deeply and wish things were different.

Reflection questions

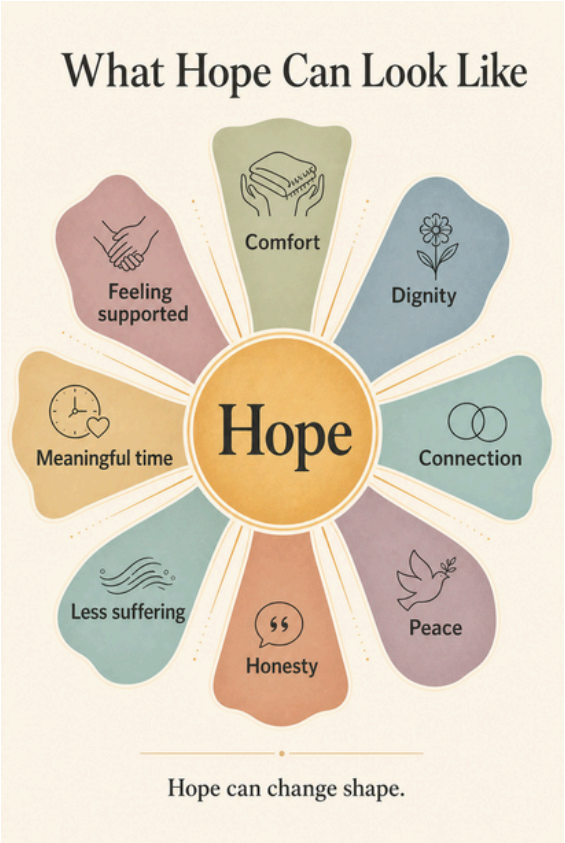
- What guilt am I carrying right now?
- Is this guilt based on something I can change, or something I cannot control?
- What would I say to a friend who felt this same guilt?
- What is one kinder sentence I can say to myself today?

When Hope and Grief Exist Together

Anticipatory grief can feel confusing because hope and grief often sit side by side.

You may hope for more time, better days, comfort, healing, peace, or meaningful conversations. At the same time, you may be grieving the reality of illness and change.
Hope does not always mean hoping for a cure.

Hope can become:
- Hope for comfort
- Hope for dignity
- Hope for less pain
- Hope for meaningful time
- Hope for honest conversations
- Hope for support
- Hope for peace
- Hope that no one feels alone



Alberta Northwest Palliative Care Society | Compassionate Support describes palliative care as support that addresses physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs, with the goal of relieving pain and other symptoms, enhancing dignity, and improving quality of life for the person and their loved ones.

Reflection questions

- What am I hoping for today?
- Has my idea of hope changed?
- What kind of comfort matters most right now?
- What would a meaningful day look like for us?

Children and Anticipatory Grief

Children often notice more than adults realize.
Even if they cannot fully understand the situation, they may sense that something is wrong.

Children may:
- Ask repeated questions
- Become clingy
- Experience sleep difficulties
- Show changes in behaviour
- Act younger than their age
- Move quickly between sadness and play

Helpful approaches include:
- Being honest
- Using age-appropriate language
- Encouraging questions
- Keeping routines whenever possible
- Reassuring them that they are loved



Children grieve differently than adults and often revisit grief as they grow and develop.

Reflection questions

- What might the children or teens in our family already be sensing?
- What words can we use to explain things honestly and gently?
- What routines can we protect for them?
- Who is a safe adult they can talk to?

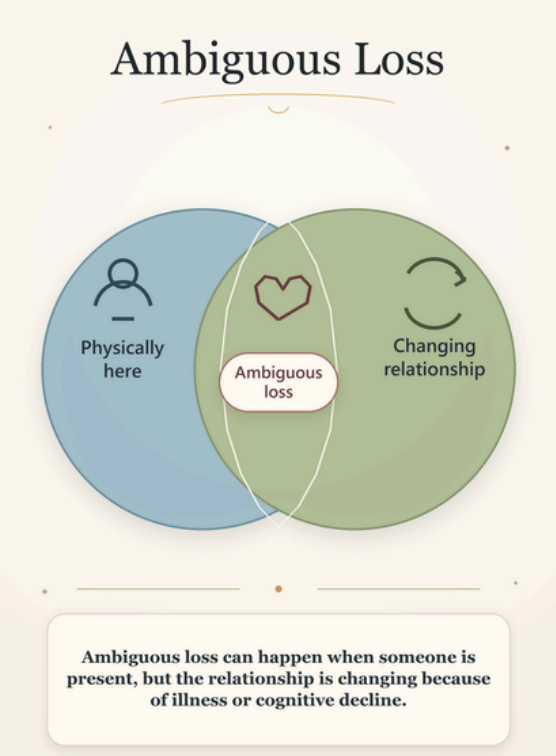
Anticipatory Grief and Dementia

Families supporting someone with dementia often experience anticipatory grief over a long period of time.

They may grieve:
- Changes in memory
- Personality changes
- Loss of recognition
- Reduced communication
- Changes in shared experiences

Many families describe feeling as though they are losing pieces of their loved one gradually.

These feelings are common and understandable.



Reflection questions

- What parts of this person do I miss already?
- What parts of them are still here that I can connect with?
- What expectations may need to change?
- What small moments of connection still matter?

Creating Meaningful Moments

When someone is seriously ill, many families find comfort in creating memories together.

Ideas may include:

- Looking through photographs
- Sharing stories
- Recording voice messages
- Writing letters
- Creating memory books
- Celebrating milestones
- Expressing gratitude and love

Meaningful moments do not remove grief, but they can provide comfort and connection.



Reflection questions

- What memory do I want to preserve?
- What do I still want to ask?
- What do I hope my loved one feels from me?
- What small moment could we create together this week?



When to Seek Additional Support

It may be helpful to seek additional support if you:

- Feel persistently overwhelmed
- Are struggling to function day-to-day
- Feel isolated or alone
- Experience significant anxiety
- Are having trouble coping with caregiving demands
- Would like a safe place to talk

Reaching out for support is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Reflection questions

- Am I coping, surviving, or feeling unsafe?
- What signs tell me I need more support?
- Who can I contact before things become a crisis?
- What number should I keep somewhere visible?

Local Support Resources and Contacts

Alberta Northwest Palliative Care

Quiet Reflections, a cozy space with comfortable seating, books, and tea or coffee, as well as grief support from Marianne Hartman, who is trained in the Companioning Model of Grief. The ABNWPCS can connect people with additional resources, including counselling, support groups, or specialized programs.

Contact information :

Alberta Northwest Palliative Care Society
204, 10134 97 Avenue
Grande Prairie, Alberta T8V 7X6
Phone: 780-897-0066
Email: admin@abnwpalliative.ca
Website: abnwpalliative.ca

Alberta Health Services

Grief & Bereavement Support - Call Health Link at 811 for information about available health services, or call 211 Alberta for community services and support. It also lists Alberta Northwest Palliative Care Society as a North Zone resource.
Contacts:
Health Link: 811
211 Alberta: 211
Website: https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/Page13161.aspx

Crisis and mental health support

Getting Help During a Mental Health Crisis - MyHealth.Alberta.ca lists Health Link at 811, the Mental Health Help Line at 1-877-303-2642, Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868, and Canada's suicide and crisis hotline at 988.
myhealth.alberta.ca
Emergency: 911
Suicide Crisis Helpline: Call or text 988
Mental Health Help Line: 1-877-303-2642
Health Link: 811
Kids Help Phone: 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868



Reflection questions

- Which resource feels easiest for me to reach out to first?
- What kind of support do I need right now: information, emotional support, crisis help, counselling, or community connection?
- What phone number should I save today?
- Who could sit with me while I make a call or send an email?

A Personal Check-In Tool

Use this as a worksheet page.

Today I am feeling:

- ◻ Sad
- ◻ Angry
- ◻ Guilty
- ◻ Afraid
- ◻ Numb
- ◻ Lonely
- ◻ Exhausted
- ◻ Hopeful
- ◻ Relieved
- ◻ Unsure
- ◻ Other: _____

Today I need:

- ◻ Rest
- ◻ Food or water
- ◻ A quiet moment
- ◻ Someone to listen
- ◻ Help with tasks
- ◻ Time with my loved one
- ◻ Time away
- ◻ Information
- ◻ Spiritual support
- ◻ Professional support
- ◻ Other: _____

One thing I can do today:

- ◻ Take three slow breaths
- ◻ Drink water
- ◻ Step outside
- ◻ Call someone
- ◻ Write down what I feel
- ◻ Ask for help
- ◻ Spend quiet time with my loved one
- ◻ Let one thing wait

You Are Not Alone

Anticipatory grief is real.

It can be heavy, confusing, tender, and exhausting. It can also be full of love. You may be grieving what has already changed, what is changing now, and what may still come.

There is no perfect way through this. There is only one step at a time, with support, compassion, and care.

Alberta Northwest Palliative Care Society
We provide compassionate support, resources, education, and grief support for individuals and families affected by progressive life-limiting illness.

Our grief supports are offered free of charge.
You do not need to wait until after a death to reach out.
Because grief can begin long before goodbye.

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