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# Fact Sheet

## Grief Reactions in Caregivers

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The loss of a loved one is one of the most stressful and difficult events one faces in life. Normally, the bereaved person initially experiences a sense of shock or numbness. This phase is quickly followed by a period of sadness, anger, and intense longing for the deceased. The next phase, which usually begins about two months after the loss, is characterized by slowly readjusting to an environment in which the deceased is missing. The final phase of grief involves withdrawing some of the emotional attachment to the deceased and investing it in the development of new relationships.

Care givers can be higher risk for complicated grief reactions. Caregivers can be at higher risk for complicated grief reactions after the death of the person for whom they've cared. The stressors of the caregiving role can set the stage for these difficulties. First of all, there may be "unfinished business" from the past which may continue to negatively impact the caregiver.

Additionally, in caring for a relative with dementia, significant relationship changes often occur. The caregiver has assumed duties and responsibilities once performed by the loved one. Major personality changes may occur, too, which can often lead to stress and anger toward the care receiver. There may be resentment and anger that, at a time when one expects to enjoy life, (the "golden years"), one must be a caregiver. All of these factors together can lead to a sense of relief, for example, when the loved one passes away. This "relief" can inhibit adequately working through the pain of the loss, which in turn, can significantly complicate the process of grief.

Problems with the grief process may be suggested by a number of possible reactions. Refusing to believe the death has occurred or refusing to go to the funeral are obvious signs. Intense grief involving constant crying and sleep disturbance for a prolonged period of time may also be indicative of problems. Other signs of complicated grief include being unwilling to part with the loved one's personal belongings, an inability to develop or maintain significant relationships, presenting an overly independent, stoic front, or not appearing to need support from others. These signs suggest the need for treatment by a qualified mental health professional because, in most cases, the grief will not be resolved on its own.

If one is seeking treatment, a good referral source would be the social worker at your local senior center. Additionally, there are several local organizations in the Bay Area which specialize in dealing with grief issues. If you are interested in further information regarding local community resources, please feel free to contact the Older Adult Center at the VA Medical Center in Menlo Park (415/858-3989).