



What is Cumulative Grief?

Cumulative Grief may occur when an individual, experiences multiple losses either all at once or before processing an earlier loss. When you have experienced multiple losses within a short time period, you may begin to wonder how much more loss you can endure. Experiencing multiple losses can be painful and overwhelming. Here are a few things to consider....

You have a unique relationship with each person who has died. Therefore, you can't be expected to lump all your feelings of grief into one box and expect to quickly unpack it all at once. Each individual loss needs to be processed separately.

When you experience multiple losses, the feelings are intense and overwhelming. There is a tendency to avoid the painful feelings of grief. This avoidance may take place in the form of busyness, denial, or substance use. Grieving multiple losses takes time. Avoidance and numbing can prolong the duration of the grief process.

Substance use and abuse can be a tempting way to numb pain, however this can further complicate cumulative grief. Often, prolonged substance abuse will suspend the grief process. When an individual stops using drug or alcohol, they find themselves faced with multiple unresolved/ungrieved losses. Ultimately, you must do the work of grieving each loss. Professional support may be helpful if this work seems impossible.

Age can increase your risk for cumulative grief. As individuals reach their 70s, 80s, and 90s they will begin to experience the deaths of friends and family members at higher rates than in the early part of their lives. At the same time, these individuals may be experiencing secondary losses of independence, mobility and familiar housing. These losses compound upon one another causing a great deal of anguish and grief.

Sometimes cumulative grief can occur over the course of a long time. When an individual has avoided processing an earlier loss or life's circumstances have prevented the mourning of a past loss, a new loss can cause all the feelings of grief to reach a boiling point. It's even happened that the forgotten grief from a loss many years earlier will come back to the surface because of a new loss. This experience can be disturbing and painful.

Tips to managing Cumulative Grief:

Allow yourself to feel pain and sorrow. When we avoid pain and sorrow it can stress our physical, mental, and emotional health, because suppressed pain WILL come out in some form.

Own your grief. Don't allow anyone to dictate how you should or should not grieve, especially multiple losses. Don't compare your grieving style or expression, with someone else's. You are unique; therefore, your grief will be unique to your personality and coping style.

Have a daily routine. When faced with multiple losses, many people feel that everything is unsettled and nothing in life is sure. While these feelings are uncomfortable, they are normal. Having a daily routine

may help you feel a small sense of control. A daily routine may be as simple as waking up and going to bed at the same time. Or doing one thing every day to promote self-care.

Practice self-care. Self-care is perhaps an overused buzz word, but it really is important when you are coping with multiple losses. Find things that are calming to your troubled spirit. This will look different for every person. Perhaps you find counseling/therapy to be helpful, or exercise, or cooking, or meditation and yoga. Do what works!

Be patient with yourself. Grieving multiple losses takes time. Some days you will feel strong enough to cope with the intense feelings, other days you will feel like giving up. Each day is a new day.

If nothing seems to work, seek professional help. A trained bereavement counselor can help you navigate the complicated nature of cumulative grief.