



COPING WITH GRIEF FOR MILITARY & VETERAN FAMILIES

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COURSE PROGRESS

Lesson 1. What is Grief?

Lesson 2. How Grief may Affect the Veteran or Service Member

Lesson 3. How Grief may Affects the Military Family

Lesson 4. Processing Grief & Coping Techniques

Lesson 5. Community Grief Support Resources



WHAT THE VETERAN OR SERVICE MEMBER MAY EXPERIENCE

Moral Injury

Survivors Guilt

Deployments

Frequent Moves

Identity Loss



HOW GRIEF MAY AFFECT THE VETERAN OR SERVICE MEMBER

Moral Injury

Moral injury is associated with military service members and veterans and is viewed as the nature of war and combat, which create situations where people may have experiences that contradict the values they live by in civilian life.

Examples include:

- killing or harming others
- making decisions that affect the survival of others
- military medics are unable to care for all the injured
- freezing or failing to perform duty during a dangerous or traumatic event
- failing to report an event that violates rules or ethics
- engaging in or witnessing acts of violence and feeling nothing
- or feeling exhilarated while causing harm to or killing others



HOW GRIEF MAY AFFECT THE VETERAN OR SERVICE MEMBER



Survivors Guilt

Survivor guilt typically arises in people who have been exposed to or witnessed death and have stayed alive leading to emotional distress and negative self-appraisal.

Often, survivors feel responsible for the death or injury of others, even when they had no real power or influence in the situation.

This can be especially true for most service members in leadership positions when they lose a subordinate which is likened to losing a child or a close mentee.

HOW GRIEF MAY AFFECT THE VETERAN OR SERVICE MEMBER

Deployments

Military service members experience many factors that likely increase their risk of developing Complicated Grief.

Such factors include:

- the unique bonds between service members
- exposure to constant and extreme stress levels during combat deployments
- multiple losses of fellow service members
- separation from family and loved ones-missed important family milestones
- witnessing/learning about sudden violent and traumatic deaths
- the handling of human remains

Service members have also expressed symptoms of Anticipatory Grief months leading up to and during deployments. The Anticipatory Grief is often brought on by the fear of dying during combat.



HOW GRIEF MAY AFFECT THE VETERAN OR SERVICE MEMBER

Frequent Moves

Military reassignments often occur every 2-3 years. Not only do service members experience losing their civilian family and friends, but they also have to say goodbye to their military family and friends. Lost connections with military mentors and mentees.

In addition to the normal stressors of moving, the service member will also experience heightened family related stressors and additional changes to their military duties.



HOW GRIEF MAY AFFECT THE VETERAN OR SERVICE MEMBER



Identity Loss

After service members leave the military, they are forced to face the daunting tasks of finding a new purpose in life, reestablishing interpersonal relationships, being employed or enrolled in college, and having access to housing, health care, and other benefits.

For veterans, reintegration is also defined as navigating new identities in their roles as a parent, spouse, student, employee, and a civilian.

Veterans may struggle with any number of interrelated difficulties:

- loss of their previous military identity
- nostalgia for the order
- Loss of military family
- Physical ability (e.g., disability acquired during service, traumatic brain injury, etc.)
- Mental health (e.g., PTSD, loss of sense of safety)
- moral injury
- confusion about military-civilian differences
- civilian life lacked meaning and purpose
- no longer felt they were contributing to an important communal effort

COMMON GRIEF SYMPTOMS IN VETERANS OR SERVICE MEMBERS

Behaviors

- Trouble falling asleep/waking too early
- Increased/decreased appetite
- Withdrawing from others
- feeling less interested in the world
- Dreaming of the deceased
- Avoiding reminders of the deceased
- Searching and calling out the name of the deceased person
- Being restlessly overactive
- Crying
- Visiting places/carrying objects that remind you of the deceased person

Emotions

- Sadness
- Anger
- Guilt or regret
- Anxiety Loneliness
- Fatigue
- Helplessness
- Shock
- Yearning
- Relief (Especially after someone dies from a lengthy/painful illness or if the relationship with the deceased was a difficult one).
- Numbness—a lack of feeling

Thoughts

- Disbelief the loss occurred
- absent-minded
- Confused thinking
- difficulty concentrating
- Being preoccupied, constantly thinking about the deceased
- Sensing a presence, thinking the deceased is still there
- Hallucinations, seeing and/or hearing the deceased

Physical

- Hollowness in the stomach
- Tightness in the chest
- Tightness in the throat
- Being overly sensitive to noise
- Feeling that nothing is real
- Feeling short of breath
- Muscle weakness/soreness
- Fatigue Dry mouth

Spirituality

- Feeling that you have lost direction in life
- Searching for meaning in the loss
- Questioning your religious or spiritual beliefs

OTHER COMMON GRIEF SYMPTOMS IN VETERANS OR SERVICE MEMBERS



Military service may affect the way one grieves in several ways:

Not recognizing emotions

Service members are taught to handle anything that comes their way and to live in survival mode. They learn to disconnect from their emotions, which aids survival and military success. However, being stoic can cause problems after returning home it may be more difficult to deal with grief if they are not in touch with your emotions.

Hidden sorrow

Hidden sorrow is grief that occurs when you do not or cannot openly tell others about a death, mourn, or receive support from them. Hidden sorrow can occur if others don't immediately recognize the service member's connection to person who died. It can occur if a death involves what some people view as a stigma such as a suicide, during a criminal act or traumatic event. Hidden grief may be difficult to recognize internally and by others. If others don't know the service member is grieving or if they don't support their grief, it may impact their ability to cope with the death.

No time to grieve

Active duty, especially while in a combat zone, may prevent grieving at the time a loss occurs or if a succession of multiple losses occur in a short period of time.

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