

7 frequent symptoms of

# unidentified grief



■ by Anne Mirza, MSW, LCSW

Could you be grieving even if you haven't lost someone?

Grief is often associated with the death and loss of someone in our lives, and this is certainly true, but it is really just one manifestation of the many forms and facets of this emotion. Our Western culture, and sometimes our Christian communities and places of

influence, still have a long way to go in the recognition of and attendance to grief. Due to this, and sometimes the influence of familial or cultural norms as well, I often observe unidentified and neglected grief in many clients suffering from unexplained symptoms. Grief is a normal and natural emotional response to loss or change of any sort. That means that even positive and anticipated changes or shifts in identity can elicit grief. If you are battling any of the unexplained symptoms below, determining if grief could be at the root of your experience can be an important step toward healing.

## 1. Sadness or depression when you expect to feel excited or joyful

In any transition there is always grief. Clients will often say to me, "but this is a good thing, I should be celebrating, why am I feeling depressed instead?" Often the answer is they haven't made room for grief or taken the time to acknowledge the loss within a positive transition. A new job, a move, leaving a relationship-even if it has been tumultuous, becoming a parent, retiring, graduating, and many other transitions are all examples of times in which we may not make space to identify and address our grief.

## 2. Physical symptoms

Our bodies are sometimes our greatest warning signs for unidentified grief. Are you experiencing a sensation of "heaviness", frequent headaches, stomach aches, fatigue, crying spells, digestive issues, decrease in appetite, disrupted sleep, or muscle soreness? A consult with a physician should be used to rule out any medical condition associated with these symptoms. After doing so, one can then assess if grief could be the cause of these physical indicators. When we pay attention to our bodies, we can often learn something that our conscious minds may not have yet acknowledged about our emotional and psychological state.

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## 3. Frequent illness and infection

Some studies have shown that grief, especially in those over 30, can cause a reduction in the functioning of our white blood cells used to fight off infections and can increase the stress hormone cortisol. This combination can lead to a vulnerability of the immune system that makes one highly susceptible to illness and infection<sup>1</sup>.

## 4. Anger and/or Irritability

If you are finding yourself to have a shorter capacity for frustration and are more easily triggered to irritability this may be another indicator of an unresolved reaction to grief. When you notice the irritability, it can be helpful to pause and ask, "what am I really feeling?"

## 5. Forgetfulness or difficulty performing normative functions

The neuroscience behind this symptom has to do with how grief affects the process of neurogenesis. Specifically, in the area of the brain called the hippocampus, which is crucial for learning and memory and plays a part in the regulation of emotion and mood. This pivotal process can be negatively impacted by prolonged, untreated, and/or unidentified grief and will often result in difficulty with normative daily functioning, memory, and/or focus.

## 6. Withdrawal, isolation, or disinterest in relationships or social activity

Whether because you are feeling misunderstood or due to an unexplained desire to pull back from normative social interaction, this is often a sign that there is a need for identifying and addressing your grief.

## 7. Anxiety/Fear

Often anxiety due to identified grief can manifest in rumination about tasks to be completed in your loss or change, anticipatory fears and worries about what is to come, obsessing and researching topics related to your transition, and/or an over emphasis on performance or the expectation of perfection from oneself. If you are suffering from these or other unexplained symptoms of anxiety, it can be useful to consider if this might be a sign of grief.

If you can relate to some or even all of these indications of unidentified grief, it is important that you allow yourself to acknowledge and process this emotional response. Grieving is a journey that is best taken with grace, a lack of expectations, support from others and God, honesty, and room for whatever time one needs. Psychotherapy, exercise, prayer, journaling, art, music, visualization/meditation, and other tools can be healthy ways to address and move through one's grief. I invite you to journey. In doing so, I encourage you to look past stereotypes, fears, and judgments about grief and choose instead to accept grief as a normal process in loss and change. It is an essential and healthy practice that we all can benefit greatly from! ■



Anne Mirza is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and sees clients in our Chicago (So Loop & Edgewater) IL location.

<sup>1</sup> Vitlic A, et al. Immun Ageing. 2014.

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