Early Grief

You or the person you are caring for may feel the effects of loss and grief before a death actually occurs. This is a normal reaction.

What are the causes of early grief?

Early grief can be related to feared, or actual, losses:

- loss of social life or companionship
- loss of independence or control
- fears related to life without that person
- change in family roles
- fear of starting over
- fear of the unknown

What are the signs and symptoms of early grief?

- Feelings of guilt, anger, or depression.
- Tearfulness and/or constant changes in emotions.
- Feelings of emotional numbness.
- Anxiety or fear.
- Changes in sleeping and eating habits.
- Poor concentration, forgetfulness, or poor memory.
- Loneliness.
- Denial
- Exhaustion (feeling tired).

What can you do to help with the early grief process?

- Go for a short walk.
- Write in a journal.
- Plan for the future.
- Talk to a friend, family member or seek spiritual help.
- Make changes only as needed. Postpone major decisions when possible.
- Focus on essential tasks. Put off chores you can do later.
- Call your hospice team if grief feels overwhelming.

If your loved one is declining rapidly…

Do not panic. You may feel helpless now, but you are not alone.

- Call your hospice nurse. Let him or her know about the changes that are going on and ask for a home visit if needed. The nurse can call others in the hospice team as needed or as you request.

You may need to do things for the person that he or she used to do independently.

- You may need to start keeping track of his or her medications. The hospice nurse can provide forms and a large medication box to help with this, if wanted. Write down when the person takes doses of medication for pain, nausea, or other symptoms.
- Keep track of when the person last urinated or had a bowel movement. If the person's bowels or bladder are not emptying easily, he or she may become agitated. Or the person may become incontinent (losing control) of urine or stool. The nurse can place an indwelling catheter (tube) to help drain urine, or bring incontinence products such as diapers, wipes, and gloves. If it has been several days since the person had a BM, they may need medicine to relieve constipation.
- Remember that hospice can bring equipment to help you care for the person, including hospital beds, bedside commodes, and wheelchairs. We want to take care of you, too, and many things can make your work easier.
- If the person is suddenly weaker or bedbound, the hospice home health aides can help with personal care and bathing. Even if you want to do these things yourself, the nurses or aides can teach you ways to make the care easier, such as how to use a draw sheet to move the person more easily and with less discomfort.
- Simple comfort measures can help the person relax. Don't forget things like gentle backrubs, moistening the person's mouth, cleaning teeth or dentures, or applying lip balm.

Take another look at your resources.

- Now may be the time to ask for help from family, friends, or co-workers.
- Privately hired home health assistance can sometimes help you care for the person and keep him or her at home. Alternatively, sometimes families look at

- options like nursing homes. The hospice social worker can help you figure out how to meet your loved one's needs.

Make the most of your time with your loved one.

- When the person is awake and alert, sit and talk with him or her, as these times may become fewer and fewer.
- Review your hospice handouts. There may be information you read before but forgot because it did not apply then. Reread "When Death is Near" and call if you have any questions or concerns (406.651.6500). No question is too trivial.
- Remember that it is thought that the person can still hear you and/or feel your touch, even if he or she is unable to respond. This can be a time to quietly reminisce, hold the person's hand, or tell the person your feelings.
- If you need to be away, you may consider support from a volunteer to provide vigil. Vigil means that a volunteer will sit with your loved one in the final minutes and hours of life, providing a calm and peaceful environment and a presence so that your loved one does not have to be alone. Typically, volunteers can provide two hours at a time for this service.
- Consider asking for a chaplain if you or the person would like spiritual support.
- Remember that the bottom line is comfort. If the person appears comfortable, you are doing a good job and should not worry. But if in doubt, call RiverStone Health Hospice anytime (406.651.6500).