

Dealing with Grief and Loss

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What is Grief?

- A natural, therapeutic reaction to loss
- A fundamental emotion
- A universal experience which makes us human
- Not a weakness, but a necessity
- Grief occurs when someone suffers through the death of a person they care about.

Grief may also come after other kinds of losses, including:

- Divorce
- losing a beloved pet
- losing your job
- losing your independence

The common thread in these situations is change. You have lost something so significant that aspects of your life are forever altered. Grief is something you may never entirely get over, but you will come to terms with it. You may even grow stronger emotionally through your grief process. Grief can make you more empathetic, an attribute that can foster richer relationships.

What kind of reactions are normal when someone grieves?

Grief can be expressed in many ways. One can experience emotional, mental, and physical symptoms when feeling a loss. Grief reactions are as different as the people who experience them. There is no right way to grieve.

Emotional symptoms may

include:

Sadness
Anxiety
Anger
Guilt
Loneliness
Crying
Depression
Difficulty in and/or withdrawal from relationships
Indecisiveness
Irritability

Jealousy
Loss of self-esteem
Moodiness
Nightmares
Restlessness
Suspiciousness
Thoughts of death or suicide

Intellectual symptoms may include:

Confusion
Concentration difficulty
Disbelief

Errors in language usage
Forgetfulness
Inattention
Lack of attention to details
Lack of awareness to external events
Loss of creativity
Loss of productivity
Memory loss
Over-achievement

Physical Symptoms may include:

Accident proneness
Alcohol use
Appetite changes
Digestion problems

Dizziness
Dry mouth
Rashes, hives
Insomnia
Low energy
Migraine headaches

Nausea (recurrent)
High blood pressure
Pounding & rapid heartbeat
Tearfulness
Weight change

There is a biophysical aspect to grief. Chemical changes occur in the body that are not unlike the “fight or flight” response. Hormonal changes can occur in the body for as long as 6-8 weeks after a stressful event. The immune system also weakens, leaving the body more susceptible to infections. If you are noticing any of these physical symptoms, it is important to drink plenty of water, reduce your salt intake, reduce your stress levels, and begin to take better care of yourself.

Stages of grief:

The expression of “normal” grief varies considerably among different cultural groups, yet there are stages of grief that occur whenever there is a loss:

- **Shock:** experiences of shortness of breath, tightness in the throat, a need to sigh, muscular limpness, and loss of appetite occur in the first few hours after a loss is experienced. As the shock abates, the physical symptoms lose their intensity and we begin to absorb reality. If there is a persistent wish during grief, it is that the loss could be reversed.
- **Denial:** allows the slow assimilation of the loss. At first the thought is that the report must be wrong. There is often the feeling that a mistake has been made and that the person will walk through the door at any minute. As time passes and preparation for change is made, reality is faced.
- **Bargaining and self-blaming:** requires a greater level of acknowledgment that the loss has occurred, but resistance lingers. We attempt to make deals to reverse fate.
- **Anger and Anxiety:** are emotional signals that our psychological equilibrium is out of sync. A loss stirs feelings of rejection and powerlessness that lead to feeling anxious. Feeling restless and unable to sleep is common. Anger at the loss, at the people who made decisions, or at the one who is gone are all normal reactions. Anger often causes the most consternation as it an emotion with which many are uncomfortable. Anger is a healthy indication that we are beginning to accept facts.
- **Acceptance: occurs with time.** The realization sets in that the situation is not going to be the same as before, or that the person is not going to return.

*There will be moments when a return to any or all of the stages occurs, yet accepting the loss allows us to move forward in the grief process.

How long does grieving last?

Grief impacts each person differently. Recent research has shown that intense grieving lasts from three months to a year, and many people continue experiencing profound grief for two years or

more. Others' response to this extended grieving process may sometimes cause people to feel there is something wrong with them or they are behaving abnormally. This is not the case.

The grieving process depends on the individual's belief system, religion, life experiences, and the type of loss suffered. Prolonged bereavement is not unusual. Many people find solace in seeking out other grievers or trusted friends. However, if feelings of being overwhelmed continue over time, professional support should be sought.

What helps the grieving process?

- What usually helps the most is being able to talk with at least one person about one's feelings—the ups and downs, the sadness and fear, the memories and hopes.
- Sometimes bereaved people want to talk with several different people about what is happening to them. Others find value in joining a support group.
- Writing can also be valuable. Keep a journal of thoughts and feelings or write letters to the one who has died. Story-writing and poetry can also help.
- Some people prefer to express themselves through painting, sculpture, sewing or woodworking.

One small thing that always helps is being able to spend time in nature and to do so at least once a day. Being in touch with the natural rhythms of life and death can be both healing and restorative.

How you can help yourself deal with a loss:

- Talk to someone.
- Eat and sleep well.
- Get plenty of exercise.
- Do things that you enjoy.
- Give yourself little presents from time to time—an evening out, a favorite treat, fresh flowers, etc.
- Do things for other people, and you will realize you can still make a difference in others' lives even if you are missing someone you love.

How you can help someone who is dealing with a loss:

- Be available. Offer support in an unobtrusive but persistent manner.
- Listen without giving advice
- Do not offer stories of your own. This can have the effect of dismissing the grieving person's pain.
- Allow the grieving person to use expressions of anger or bitterness, including such expressions against God. This may be an attempt to find meaning in what has happened.
- Realize that no one can replace or undo the loss. To heal, the individual must endure the grief process. Allow him/her to feel the pain.
- Don't force the individual to share feelings if he/she doesn't want to.

- Physical and emotional touch can bring great comfort to the bereaved. Don't hesitate to share a hug or handclasp when appropriate.
- Be there later, when friends and family have gone back to their routines.

Remember holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries which have important meaning for the bereaved. Offer support during this time. Don't be afraid of reminding the person of the loss. He/she is already thinking about it.

Resources:

- UST Counseling & Disability Services (713) 525-2169
- Grief Resource Center (281) 292-6800 <http://www.tgrconline.org>
- Crisis Hotline (713) 228-1505 or (713) 333-5111
- Teenline (713) 529-TEEN
- Spanish Hotline (713)526-8088

Information compiled from these resources:

The Bo's Place Volunteer Training Manual, 1999, The Grief Center of Texas. 5501 Austin, P.O. Box 271165-1165, Houston, TX 77277; (713) 942-1165

Family Caregiver Alliance, Fact Sheet: Grief and Loss; 1996;
www.caregiver.org/factsheets/griefC.html

Mercer University, Grief and Loss; 2000; www.mercer.edu/residence/griefand.htm

University of Maryland; Grief & Loss in the Workplace: Grief Reactions and Grief Stages; 2000
www.umich.edu/-hrraa/griefandloss/reactions.html