

Loss and Grief

What is grief?

Grief is a natural response to loss. It's the emotional suffering you feel when something or someone you love is taken away. You may associate grief with the death of a loved one – and this type of loss does often cause the most intense grief. But any loss can cause grief, including:

- A relationship breakup
- Loss of health
- Losing a job
- Loss of financial stability
- A miscarriage
- Death of a pet
- Loss of a cherished dream
- A loved one's serious illness
- Loss of a friendship
- Loss of safety after a trauma

The more significant the loss, the more intense the grief feels. However, even subtle losses can lead to grief. For example, you might experience grief after moving away from home, graduating from high school or college; or even leaving your pet when you move away to college.

Grieving is a personal and highly individual experience. How you grieve depends on many factors, including your personality and coping style, your life experience, your faith, and the nature of the loss. The grieving process takes time. Healing happens gradually; it can't be forced or hurried – and **there is no "normal" timetable for grieving**. It is important not to judge others for how they grieve. Some people start to feel better in weeks or months. For others, the grieving process is measured in years. Whatever your grief experience, it's important to be patient with yourself and allow the process to naturally unfold.

What does one go through during a normal grieving process?

Just remember that almost anything that you experience in the early stages of grief is normal – including feeling like you're going crazy, feeling like you're in a bad dream, or questioning your religious beliefs. While loss affects people in different ways, many people experience the following symptoms when they're grieving.

- **Shock and disbelief** – Right after a loss, it can be hard to accept what happened. You may feel numb, have trouble believing that the loss really happened, or even deny the truth. If someone you love has died, you may keep expecting them to show up, even though you know they're gone.
- **Sadness** – Profound sadness is probably the most universally experienced symptom of grief. You may have feelings of emptiness, despair, yearning, or deep loneliness. You may also cry a lot or feel emotionally unstable.
- **Guilt** – You may regret or feel guilty about things you did or didn't say or do. You may also feel guilty about certain feelings (e.g. feeling relieved when the person died after a long, difficult illness). After a death, you may even feel guilty for not doing something to prevent the death, even if there was nothing more you could have done.
- **Anger** – Even if the loss was nobody's fault, you may feel angry and resentful. If you lost a loved one, you may be angry at yourself, God, the doctors, or even the person who died for

abandoning you. You may feel the need to blame someone for the injustice that was done to you.

- **Irritability**-- The bereaved person may feel anger and irritability toward others and may alienate those people they need the most. Self-reproach and guilt are common.
- **Fear** – A significant loss can trigger a host of worries and fears. You may feel anxious, helpless, or insecure. You may even have panic attacks. The death of a loved one can trigger fears about your own mortality, of facing life without that person, or the responsibilities you now face alone.
- **Physical Symptoms** – We often think of grief as a strictly emotional process, but grief often involves physical problems, including fatigue, nausea, lowered immunity, weight loss or weight gain, aches and pains, and insomnia.
- **Emotional Symptoms** -- Anxiety (including panic attacks) as well as feelings of fear can be experienced. There is often a hesitancy to return to the regular routine of living. It is also common for the bereaved to frequently review and relive memories of the deceased and the events leading up to the death.

What are the tasks of mourning?

Dr. William Worden in his classic book, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, defines mourning in terms of the following tasks to be accomplished. Sharon O'Brien, About.com adds her experience as a therapist as well:

- **Learn to accept that your loss is real.** For many people who are grieving a loss, the first impulse is to deny the loss. Grieving denial can range from downplaying the loss, as if it's not important, to having the delusion that the person or pet is still alive. It's often easier for people who are grieving to have an intellectual understanding of the death (the person or pet is physically gone) than an emotional understanding (the loved one is not coming back). So the first task for the grieving person is accepting that the loved one is really gone.
- **Make it OK to feel the pain.** The pain of grieving can be both emotional and physical, and unfortunately there's no way to avoid it. Denying the pain of grieving can lead to physical symptoms and can also prolong the grieving process. Some people try to avoid grieving pain by being busy or traveling; others try to minimize grieving their loss by idealizing the loved one or refusing to allow negative thoughts about the loved one enter their minds. Some grieving people use drugs or alcohol to deaden the pain. Feeling the pain of grieving is difficult, but it's an important step toward healing.
- **Adjust to living without the deceased.** When a loved one dies, we also lose the part of our lifestyle that included the deceased. So while we are grieving for the loved one, we are also grieving for the parts of our life that will never be the same. Sometimes it can take a few months following the death for this realization to sink in. For example, if a man's wife dies, he misses her physically and emotionally, but he may also have lost a dear friend, sexual partner, golfing buddy, and fellow grandparent. Part of his grieving will naturally include missing the parts of his life that have changed because of her death. Grieving the loss of shared activities can feel as painful as grieving for the person or pet. So it's a natural tendency for some people to feel that their lives are emptier following a loss. This is a normal feeling for a time, but part of the

grieving and healing process includes acceptance, and shifting our focus to include other people and activities. This opens the door to finding new opportunities for love and companionship.

- **Find a safe place in your heart for your loved one, and allow yourself to move on.** This task can be especially hard for a grieving person because it can feel at first that you're being disloyal when you start to think about enjoying a life that doesn't include the deceased. It's likely that memories of the loved one will stay with you throughout your life, and sometimes, even years after the death, you may feel a stab of pain when you think about the beloved person or pet that was so important to you. When this happens, it's important to remind yourself that it's a normal part of the grieving and healing process. Allow yourself to have these feelings.
- **Learning to cherish a memory without letting it control you is a very important step in the grieving process.** By finding a special safe "place" for that person, you can heal from grieving and move back into your life. You begin to find joy in new experiences, and you can take comfort in the knowledge that you keep your cherished memories with you, wherever you go. The important thing is learning how to cherish a memory without getting stuck there.
- **And finally, what do you do with the love that you feel?** For many people, the hardest part of losing a loved one and grieving that loss is figuring out what to do with all the love they feel for the person or pet that is gone. The fact is, you don't have to stop loving someone just because he or she is no longer with you. When a memory pops up, send a loving thought and know that you are loved in return. You may find comfort in this, and the strength to continue on in your journey.

What can help the grief process?

The following suggestions can facilitate the grief process:

- **Be kind to yourself.** Avoid extra responsibilities. Set small goals. Expect and accept some reduction in your efficiency, consistency, and energy.
- **Be patient with yourself.** In coping with death, it is important to accept the natural grief process. There is no shortcut through grief. There is no timetable for grief.
- **Realize that there is no right way to grieve.** People grieve in their own ways.
- **The single most important factor in healing from loss is having the support of other people.** Even if you aren't comfortable talking about your feelings under normal circumstances, it's important to express them when you're grieving. Sharing your loss makes the burden of grief easier to carry.
 - **Turn to friends and family members** – Now is the time to lean on the people who care about you, even if you take pride in being strong and self-sufficient. Draw loved ones close, rather than avoiding them, and accept the assistance that's offered. Oftentimes, people want to help but don't know how, so tell them what you need – whether it's a shoulder to cry on or help with funeral arrangements.
 - **Draw comfort from your faith** – If you follow a religious tradition, embrace the comfort its mourning rituals can provide. Spiritual activities that are meaningful to you – such as praying, meditating, or going to church – can offer solace. If you're questioning your faith in the wake of the loss, talk to a clergy member or others in your religious community.

- **Join a support group** – Grief can feel very lonely, even when you have loved ones around. Sharing your sorrow with others who have experienced similar losses can help. To find a bereavement support group in your area, contact local hospitals, hospices, funeral homes, and counseling centers.
- **Talk to a therapist or grief counselor** – If your grief feels like too much to bear, call a mental health professional with experience in grief counseling. An experienced therapist can help you work through intense emotions and overcome obstacles to your grieving.
- **Consider talking to someone who will listen to your story or with whom you can share your emotions.** This may be a roommate, friend, spouse, relative, faculty person, advisor, counselor, spiritual leader. Many churches and communities have support groups and support networks for the bereaved. Realize also that some people choose to work through their grief alone and find solitude to be a healing antidote for them.
- **Consider participating in religious and cultural rituals** (attending the wake, funeral, etc.) or in familial and personal rituals (visiting the grave site, lighting a candle). This helps bring closure and helps you with the task of accepting that the loss is real.
- **Stay in the routines of your life as much as possible.** Avoid making sudden or major decisions.
- **Remember the basics.** It is helpful to maintain good nutrition and healthy sleep habits. Exercise regularly in moderation. Minimize or avoid drugs, alcohol, and tobacco.

Take care of yourself

The stress of a major loss can quickly deplete your energy and emotional reserves, so it is more important than ever to take care of yourself. Looking after your physical and emotional needs will help you get through this difficult time.

- **Face your feelings.** You can try to suppress your grief, but you can't avoid it forever. In order to heal, you have to acknowledge the pain. Trying to avoid feelings of sadness and loss only prolongs the grieving process. Unresolved grief can also lead to complications such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and health problems.
- **Express your feelings in a tangible or creative way.** Write about your loss in a journal. If you've lost a loved one, write a letter saying the things you never got to say; make a scrapbook or photo album celebrating the person's life; or get involved in a cause or organization that was important to him or her.
- **Look after your physical health.** The mind and body are connected. When you feel good physically, you'll also feel better emotionally. Combat stress and fatigue by getting enough sleep, eating right, and exercising. Don't use alcohol or drugs to numb the pain of grief or lift your mood artificially.
- **Don't let anyone tell you how to feel, and don't tell yourself how to feel either.** Your grief is your own, and no one else can tell you when it's time to "move on" or "get over it." Let yourself feel whatever you feel without embarrassment or judgment. It's okay to be angry, to yell at the heavens, to cry or not to cry. It's also okay to laugh, to find moments of joy, and to let go when you're ready.
- **Plan ahead for grief "triggers".** Anniversaries, holidays, and milestones can reawaken memories and feelings. Be prepared for an emotional wallop, and know that it's completely normal. If you're sharing a holiday or lifecycle event with other relatives, talk to them ahead of time about their expectations and agree on strategies to honor the person you loved.

- **Forgive everyone everything, including yourself** - Resentment is like taking poison and waiting for other person to die. When you forgive, you are freed from the past and empowered to live a joyful life in the present and create a meaningful, joyful the future.
- **Help others** - The final stage of grief is when you lend a helping hand to support others. That's when you know that you have healed.

When should a bereaved person seek counseling?

Grief is a normal form of sadness, and it is healthy to move through this sadness and feel its pain; however, there are times when you may need help to keep moving through it. The following are examples of when to consider seeking counseling:

- Feeling "stuck" in the grief process
- Not having a support person/system
- Feeling that your day-to-day functioning is impaired
- Feeling intensely depressed or worthless
- Having obsessive thoughts of death or feeling suicidal
- Feeling that you cannot cope and that you are becoming a burden to others
- Feeling emotionally numb or feeling panicked or frenzied
- Going to extremes to avoid thinking about the loss such as abusing drugs or alcohol or becoming totally immersed in school or work to the exclusion of everything else

Does the grief process ever end?

Grief is often a long-term process. It sometimes feels that it will go on indefinitely and that there will be no end to the sorrow. Grieving, of course, will never change the facts of the loss nor erase the memories of the loved one. When the grief process is allowed to work, however, the intense hurt does subside and the bereaved person can go on to live a full life. Some people even report feeling strengthened following the death of a loved one because the loss caused them to pause and to re-examine their lives.

References:

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