



Grief & Mourning

The death of someone close to us throws us into a sea of chaotic feelings. Sometimes, the waves of emotions seem powerful enough to threaten our very survival. They feel relentless and never-ending. Other times, they quiet down, only to arise months or even years later when we least expect them.

Grief is not something we ever really "get over"—our loss remains a fact for a lifetime. Nothing about grief's journey is simple; there is no tidy progression of stages, and the course is long and circular.

While there is no clear roadmap, there are some features common to almost everyone's experience. Some of the dimensions presented below may ebb and flow within a natural healing process. The walk down grief's road requires time, patience, attention, hard work, and lots of loving care.

Grief is the natural human response to any loss, not only death. An illness, job change, divorce or separation, unfulfilled dream, move to a new location, or any other change can bring about a grief response. Grief is not a problem. Grief is a normal, healthy process of healing.

Shock and Surprise

Even if death is expected, you may feel numb or anesthetized for several weeks afterward. Your actions may be mechanical, and you may get things done (for example, handle all the funeral details), but you are not "all there." People around you may be saying "Wow, he/she is so strong," or "He/she is handling this so well." However, the impact or reality of the death may not have fully reached you. This period of shock is your psyche's way of protecting you by allowing reality in slowly. If the loss is sudden, unexpected, or violent, the period of numbness may be longer.

Emotional Release

As the period of shock wears off, reality can be acutely painful. As the full impact gradually dawns on you, conflict may arise about whether or not to show grief; if you do choose to express your grief, you might feel conflicted about how much to show and for how long. You might try to keep up a good front or remain strong, even though you may feel like crying or screaming. If people are praising you for being so brave and not falling apart, do you dare show them how you really feel? This is a time when emotional release is important and should be encouraged. Concealing painful feelings may prolong the grief process as well as increase physical and emotional distress. At this point, other mourners can help support your expression of grief.

Loneliness

Sometimes, even before the funeral, the feelings of loneliness, isolation, and depression begin. The funeral is the focus for realizing that your loved one is really gone. Family and friends can be helpful and consoling, but after the funeral, the prevailing attitude is to turn the page and move on with our lives. The supportive people in your life may disappear. After the funeral, you may suffer a second major loss: the everyday contact with your loved one. For some, this might mean no home cooked meals, coming home to an empty house, no welcome home greeting. For others, the death might mean no one to cook for, no one to help with household chores, no one to hold, and no one to share the small, everyday moments with. If your child has died, there is no one to see come home from school, no one to share your future dreams with or to see grow up. If your loved one has been sick for a long time, you no longer have hospital visits to make. Your entire routine of

daily living has been shattered. You may feel alone, suddenly overcome by an utter sense of depression and despair. Having people in your life who can validate the magnitude of your loss during this time is imperative.

Physical Distress with Anxiety

Questions that may come up for you include: What am I going to do? What is going to happen to me? How can I get along without him/her? Will I lose my friends? You may develop the same type of physical symptoms your loved one had. For example, if he/she had a heart attack, you may now experience chest pains. Anxiety and stress may bring physical symptoms such as shortness of breath, insomnia, headaches, backaches, or an upset stomach. During the entire grief process, you need to take especially good care of your body. You may want to see your physician for a physical examination.

Panic and Disorganization

You may have trouble concentrating on anything but the loss. You may feel something is wrong with you, you may replay thoughts such as, "I can not get the images out of my mind. Will they ever stop?" or "Sometimes I think I see him/her. Sometimes I hear his/her voice. I have got to do something. I can not sleep. I can not eat. All I do is think about him/her. Will the pain ever stop?" As a bereaved person, you need to know this does not mean you are going crazy. This is a normal part of the grieving process.

Guilt

When faced with real or imagined guilt, you may begin asking questions like, "What if I had stayed awake/stayed awake/etc?" or "What if I told him/her that I loved him/her?" These questions may indicate guilt, regret, or unfinished business, which need to be expressed. These feelings can be brought to the surface by sharing with a non-judgmental listener; writing these thoughts in a letter or a diary can also provide the same benefits. Partial or complete interruption of the grief process at this time can cause severe depression and/or suicidal feelings.

Hostility, Projection, and Anger

In conjunction with or emerging from the feelings of guilt, you may experience hostility. Maybe you are hostile to people whom you perceive contributed to your problem. Example, you may think that the physician did not do enough to save your loved one. You may feel anger towards friends who draw away from you or seem to belittle your loss with well meaning but clumsy remarks. You may be furious with God for taking away your loved one. You may also be mad with your loved one for dying and abandoning you. Anger is a very normal, human emotion, and these feelings must be released. Talking about the pain and engaging in physical activity both help keep anger from burning inside.

Suffering in Silence and Depression

This is a time when you may suffer in silence. You may feel fatigued, worn out, and unable to get started in any activity. You may not want to talk about your feelings of emptiness and loneliness, because you feel that others expect you to stop grieving. Except for the initial loss, this stage is the hardest. You may feel alone. You may have feelings of not wanting to live and then shock or guilt for having such thoughts. This is a period where you are recreating meaning in life, and this takes time.

The Gradual Overcoming of Grief

Your adjustment to your new life gradually occurs while working through this grief period. There can be a noticeable change as early as four weeks to three months after the death, but often the change occurs much later. By the end of this phase, there is a considerable brightening of mood, more activity, and the beginning of re-establishing relationships with people.

Readjustment to Reality

Because people in Western cultures do not use traditional everyday symbols of grief, such as wearing a black veil or white clothing, others can easily forget that you are grieving. You begin to restructure your life without your loved one. You may want to take a vacation, get involved in a new activity, or take up old activities you used to like. Occasionally, you may feel twinges of guilt as

you begin to enjoy yourself or laugh freely again, as though you are somehow betraying the memory of your lost loved one. These feelings of guilt, however, get in the way of readjustment. Wedding anniversaries, holidays, birthdays, or the anniversary date of the death may cause a temporary flood of feelings or may bring back a short version of the grief process. This is normal and does not mean that you will be in acute pain forever.

REMEMBER...

Grief is a natural life experience we all go through in healing from loss and change. Each grief journey is unique. Reaching out to others for support and being kind to yourself can enable us to survive the pain.

the Centre for Living with Dying
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