

Grief and Loss

Washington State Employee Assistance Program

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Grief and Loss

We encounter many traumatic and painful losses throughout our lifetime – the death of a family member or friend, illness or injury, the loss of a job or a dream. We may move and never see our childhood home again; friendships fade; finances dwindle; we marry and divorce. Every change - - desired or not, large or small -- involves loss. Losses shape our lives. The loss for which most of us are least prepared is for the death of someone we love.

Is There Any Way to Avoid Grief?

The most common response to loss is grief, a complex, evolutionary, and frightening experience. Grief is a natural reaction to any significant change. Oftentimes when ignored or denied, grief can harm us in dozens of ways. Scientific research indicates that grief can make people more susceptible to illness and increase blood pressure and heart rate. Grief can also cause flashbacks, fatigue, and insomnia. Several studies link bereavement to an increase in lung, cervical and breast tumors.

The Phases of Grief

Reactions to loss vary widely from person to person and may cover a confusing range of emotions. The states of grief are often unpredictable. Some people plummet into despair, others feel numb and postpone the pain. Reactions depend on our personalities, the type of loss, the existence of previous losses, and the social support we receive. The time it takes for an emotional wound to heal varies from person to person. Grief cannot be reduced to a formula, but the pattern of grief is often:

1. Shock and denial
2. Anger
3. Guilt/Bargaining
4. Depression/Anxiety
5. Acceptance/Healing

Shock and Denial

It is often difficult to acknowledge and experience the full shock of a loss right away. Denial is a psychological defense mechanism used to screen out many unhappy experiences by ignoring them. In an effort to suppress painful reality, we use denial as a largely unconscious way of protecting ourselves from anxiety and pain. Denial and dismay are often present in the early stages of a loss. It is sometimes easier to allow a loss to come into our awareness gradually instead of all at once. Problems can occur, however, when this friendly protective mechanism becomes a way of life.

Anger

Losing something precious may seem unfair. People may feel resentful and angry with themselves and others for not being able to prevent the loss. Anger can be difficult to express; it makes many people so uneasy that they suppress it and feel depressed and guilty instead. Anger is often a reaction not just to the loss, but to our own changed circumstances or feelings of abandonment. It will take time, but you can overcome anger by finding alternative outlets for your feelings or by talking things over with supportive people.

Guilt

It is not unusual to blame oneself for something we did or didn't do prior to a loss. Guilt can be associated with many types of losses – divorces, job changes and death. When a loved one dies, many people feel guilty merely because they are still alive and the other person is dead. But it is important to acknowledge and accept the fact that there are events we just can't control. The chances are great that nothing you could have done would have prevented the loss. The most important step when you're feeling guilty is to forgive yourself.

Depression

For many people, grief manifests itself primarily as depression. Depression, which is a normal reaction to a loss, can be the most difficult and long-lasting phase of grieving. Depressed people feel tired, isolated, hopeless, helpless, lonely, and sad. They have trouble concentrating, making decisions, and experience changes in their eating and sleeping habits. Every object becomes a painful reminder. Life seems pointless and without hope. As grief lessens and we find other reasons to live, depression usually fades.

Anxiety

Fear and anxiety are natural components of grief. Episodes of panic and other physical symptoms such as disturbed sleep, appetite changes, restlessness and fatigue are not uncommon during the first three to six months of grief. Loss shows us how vulnerable we are – that we have no guarantees in life. People close to us die, divorce, or move away. After a divorce or death of spouse, many people are anxious about living alone. The fear of losing another loved one is common after a death and may result in excessive concern for the safety and health of others closest to you. Other worries may also surface, such as the fear of losing a job, fear of one's own death, or apprehensions about starting life over again.

Acceptance/Healing

Eventually most of us will reach a stage where we can accept our loss. When the pain of grief does fade, our thinking becomes sharper, judgment more reliable, concentration improved and our view of the world is less dismal. We should be able to remember the loss with a twinge of sadness. When we reach the point where the past no longer overwhelms us, we can regain the ability to laugh and enjoy ourselves, appreciate things of beauty, pay attention to events in the news, talk about the loss in a normal conversation tone and make plans for the future.

Children and Grief

Children react differently to a loss than adults. According to a child and adolescent psychiatrist, it is normal for some children not to feel much immediate grief in the weeks following a loss. If the child doesn't accept the loss eventually, or avoids grief, it can result in problems later in life. When parents divorce or a family member dies, many children will act younger than they are. The child may temporarily become more infantile, demanding food, attention and cuddling, and speaking in "baby talk". Younger children may believe that someone dies because they had once "wished" the person dead or that they are responsible for their parents' divorce. If a child suffers from an extended period of depression, inability to sleep, loss of appetite, acts much younger for an extended period, withdraws from friends and/or shows a sharp drop in school performance, professional help may be needed to assist the child through the grieving process.

Coping with Grief

People who cope successfully with grief eventually find new activities, form new relationships, and become more active and independent. They learn that, with understanding, they can survive loss and overcome its mental and physical effects. As a result of the loss, they have become hardier and more resilient to life's setbacks.

Strategies for Surviving Loss

When you suffer a loss, your life is sometimes turned upside down. Here are some ways to get the support you need:

- Tell people that you need to talk about your loss – friends and family may be afraid to bring up the subject for fear of hurting you.
- Ask for specific help – when someone volunteers to help, take advantage of his or her generosity. Identify specific requests: babysitting, cooking, or giving you a hug.
- Balance your need for company with your need for solitude – you may need some time alone just after a loss, but as time passes, loneliness may become a larger problem.
- Prepare for holidays and anniversaries – many people become depressed during the holiday season or on the anniversary of a death. Make arrangements to spend time with friends or family during these painful times.
- Consider the needs of others – some friends are uncomfortable with grief. Seek the support of friends who are sympathetic and supportive.
- Don't rely on your family – when the family is already “stressed out,” find support from other people.
- Take care of your body – good nutrition, exercise and massage are good ways of preventing some of the physical effects of grief such as insomnia or weight loss.
- Give yourself simple pleasures – although indulging in a bubble bath, renting a movie, taking a vacation or going to ball games will not resolve all your problems, they can provide relief.

Professional Help

There are many sources of help available for someone who has suffered a loss. Many people find comfort in joining support groups, such as Divorce Anonymous, Compassionate Friends, Job Seekers, etc. These self-help groups offer guidance, support, and a place to express feelings with others who have had similar experiences.

Although support groups can be extremely beneficial, in some cases professional help may be needed. Many grieving persons suffer from anxiety, depression or thoughts of suicide. Trained professionals can help people to understand these feelings, create new goals and adjust to their loss. The first step in seeking help is to arrange for a diagnostic evaluation with a therapist who can identify underlying or associated emotional problems and make proper treatment

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recommendations. The most effective methods of treatment include individual, group and/or family counseling to help people cope with and overcome their grief.

Growth and Recovery

We all need to come to terms with painful losses in our lives. Fortunately, there is relief. The more you understand your thoughts, feelings and the grieving process, the better you will be able to regain the joy and fulfillment you once knew. Reaching out for information and assistance can make the difference.