

GRIEF AND LOSS

We all experience loss. Whether it's the loss of a friend, loved one, beloved pet, job, marriage, or even physical abilities due to illness or age, loss can be one of the hardest challenges to face. Grief is a natural response to loss, but it can be difficult to manage. Though the focus of this handout is about grieving a death, many of the reactions and coping strategies can be applied to other losses.

Grief reactions

Grief is experienced and expressed in many different ways. Working through grief is a process, but that process is not done in a set time frame or in step by step stages, as was once thought. We don't have to finish one emotional stage in order to experience another. Everyone moves through grief on their own timetable and in their own way.

The experience of grief is influenced by many factors:

How hard grief hits may depend on the kind of relationship you had with the person who passed. The death of an acquaintance may be very different from the death of a close family member. Your history with loss is another factor. One loss can bring up memories and feelings of a previous loss. Your style of coping and how you express emotions will have an impact. Your religious beliefs and customs are another factor in how grief is processed. The circumstances of the death also play a role. A sudden, unexpected death can be especially difficult. A violent or "senseless" death can add more layers to your grief experience.

Feelings, emotions and reactions vary:

When someone you care for dies, you may experience many different feelings and emotions. These are a normal part of the grief process. You may feel numb, disbelief or be in denial. Sadness, despair, loneliness and yearning for the deceased are very common. At times you may feel anxiety or panic. You might have a loss of appetite, or difficulty sleeping or concentrating. Anger, irritability and

wanting to be alone are also normal reactions. You may feel guilty or want to blame someone. You may struggle with thoughts of "What if..." or "If only...", or the idea that you or someone else could or should have done something to prevent the death. You may even feel relief if the person had been in pain or was suffering.

How long grief lasts:

Rather than a set of stages that we work through to get to "acceptance," we now know that there is no "normal" time period for someone to progress through their grief. What we do know is:

- > Grief can come and go. It can feel like waves that vary in intensity. You can feel better and then get hit by another wave, only to feel sad or devastated again.
- > With the loss of someone close, there is the further loss of the future you expected to share together. Grief can flare up during key milestone moments, such as graduations, weddings, a birth or holidays.
- > The pain of a loss may never go away completely but usually lessens in intensity over time.

"Everyone grieves in different ways. For some, it could take longer or shorter. I do know it never disappears. An ember still smolders inside me. Most days, I don't notice it, but, out of the blue, it'll flare to life."

– Maria V. Snyder, *Storm Glass*
Source: Goodreads.com

Coping

Just as you are unique, the way you will grieve will be unique. Be compassionate toward yourself. Be accepting of how you feel, even if the feelings take you by surprise or don't follow what you think you "should" feel. Grief does not follow a prescribed timeline, so trust what feels natural to you.

- > It can be helpful to follow your family, spiritual, or cultural rituals and/or develop your own way of memorializing your loved one.
- > Consider what has helped you cope during tough times in the past. These moves or ways of thinking may help you cope with a loss. Trust in your ability to find your way forward.
- > Some people find sleeping when possible and eating small, frequent meals can help their body better manage the demands that grief places on them. Others find that maintaining their regular routine helps while they work on finding their "new normal."
- > While grief often shows up when you don't expect it, there are times when you can anticipate it. This might be on anniversaries or other days that were special to you. Planning to take extra good care of yourself on those days may be helpful.
- > Accepting practical help from loved ones can bring a sense of closeness, even though one might feel a tendency to pull away.
- > Reading on the topic of grief, attending support groups or seeking counseling (spiritual or professional) may help you learn new coping skills.

When to seek support:

Most people can gradually adapt to a loss on their own through the passage of time, with a strong support network and good self-care. However, if you find that your experience of grief hasn't lessened or become more manageable over time, you may be experiencing **complicated grief**. People sometimes report an inability to accept the death. Sometimes they experience severe and prolonged sadness, anger, flashbacks or nightmares. They may behave in ways that are out of character for them. In other cases, addiction issues may slow recovery from a loss.

If these concerns or others are worrying you, you can seek assistance from a mental health professional, your doctor or your EAP.

How to support someone who is grieving:

It's hard to know what to say or how to treat someone who has experienced a loss. It can be helpful to focus on how you can lend support, rather than trying to "fix it" for them. Just being there and being willing to listen can provide comfort.

What to say or do:

- > "I am sorry for your loss."
- > "I'm not sure what to say, but please know I care."
- > "My favorite memory of your loved one is..."
- > "I can't know how you feel, but I am here to help in any way I can."
- > Offer practical help and support such as bringing meals, helping with child care, yard work, errands.

What not to say or do:

- > "She is in a better place."
- > "At least he lived a long life."
- > "I know just how you feel."
- > "It was his time."
- > "Be strong."
- > Avoid the topic.

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