

The Experience of Grief

What is it Like to Grieve?

Grief is a normal and sometimes powerful range of thoughts and feelings that individuals have after a loss. Grief is experienced on many levels. The most obvious effects of grief are on our feelings. Almost all emotions can be a part of a grief reaction.

The range of emotions might include shock, anger, depression, fear, agitation, numbness, confusion, relief, peace, and/or guilt as a result of any of these emotions. These and other symptoms of grief can happen suddenly, or build over time. It is likely that they will also change as time goes on, sometimes in unexpected ways. Many bereaved persons will experience highly intense, time-limited periods (e.g., 20–30 minutes) of distress, variously called grief bursts or pangs. Sometimes these pangs are understandable reactions to reminders of the deceased person, and at other times they seem to occur unexpectedly.

Grief is experienced in physical symptoms, such as tense muscles, gastrointestinal upsets, trouble sleeping, fatigue or actual illness.

Grief is not limited to experiencing a death of a friend or loved one. Grief is experienced with any loss. Some examples include changing jobs, schools or locations; relationship break-ups; illness or disability; and family conflicts.

There is no time limit on grief. Over time, most bereaved people will experience symptoms less frequently, with briefer duration, or with less intensity. Although there is no clear agreement on any specific time period needed for recovery, most bereaved persons experiencing normal grief will note a lessening of symptoms at anywhere from 6 months through 2 years post loss. However, there is no time limit on grief. Individuals may grieve for longer periods of time. Grief is an individual experience.

It is very easy to see why grieving people wonder if they are normal. Our understanding of grief is limited, and every human being is very different. There is no "right" way to grieve, and there are no short cuts around grief. Grieving is not a weakness, it's a necessity. Grief is how we heal from our loss and move on.

Stages of Grief

A number of theoretically derived stage models of normal grief have been proposed. Some models have organized the variety of grief-related symptoms into phases or stages, suggesting that grief is a process marked by a series of phases, with each phase consisting of predominant characteristics.

A recent stage model of normal grief organizes psychological responses into four stages: *numbness-disbelief*, *separation distress*, *depression-mourning*, and *recovery*. Although presented as a stage model, this model explains "it is important to emphasize

that the idea that grief unfolds inexorably in regular phases is an oversimplification of the highly complex personal waxing and waning of the emotional process.” Bereavement researchers have found empirical support for this four-stage model, although other researchers have questioned these findings.

Moving Through Grief

As we wade through these feelings, we must also cope with the world outside. We may feel angry that the world won't slow down and that it doesn't seem to take notice of this awesome event in our lives. The world around us continues with business as usual.

It hurts when others don't mention the loss and sometimes it hurts when they do. We need some time alone to get our bearings. We may wish to regain our identity by resuming our routine, or we might plunge into activities that keep us too busy to feel.

If you've been carrying your grief to work each day, or if you're returning to the job after a loss, you may be wondering how you're going to get through this time or how you are going to get through the rest of your life.

You now have *two* jobs. You have responsibilities to your employer and you have the very important work of grief. It can't be put aside or ignored. The only way past grief is to *move through* grief. Grief is hard work and often lonely work, but you can find comfort and guidance along the way.

Suggestions for Those Who Grieve:

1. Taking Care of Yourself

- ❖ Don't expect too much of yourself. Do the things that you can.
- ❖ When life seems out of control, we begin to reclaim it a little at a time. Take control of seemingly small things: who to be with, what to do and what to put off till later.
- ❖ Major decisions can wait. Give yourself time before you make any changes that will alter the rest of your life, such as, moving, selling a house, or changing jobs.
- ❖ Time is your friend. Make sure that you take time to rest, to be with people who support you, and to be alone with your thoughts.
- ❖ Decide that you will survive intense emotions. Don't turn away from painful sadness or anger because you are afraid of "losing it." Locate a quiet place and let yourself go; you can "find it" again. Seek supportive people who will be with you when you are experiencing these emotions.
- ❖ Pay special attention to your needs during holiday seasons or important anniversaries. These are times when feelings of grief may return. Honor your happy memories and acknowledge the loss.

2. Getting Back to Work

- ❖ Decide how private you need to be and tell your supervisor. Many people feel supported by caring questions but it's okay to ask that only one person in the office coordinate these good intentions.
- ❖ Talk with your supervisor about your hours. You may be more tired than you know and a temporary schedule adjustment may help.
- ❖ Ask your supervisor about a private place to gather your thoughts. Expect feelings to emerge out of nowhere. Speak up when you need a few minutes alone.

3. Connecting With Others

- ❖ At some point, you'll want to talk about your experience. Telling your story is an important part of the healing work of grief. Find at least one good listener. Listening is one of the best gifts that anyone can give you.
- ❖ Expect people won't always say the right thing (if there is a right thing). They may be as inexperienced at offering help as you are at grieving. Accept that they mean well.
- ❖ Realize that your loss will remind others of their own losses. Some people may become tearful or want to share their stories with you. Listening may bring comfort, but if it's more than you can bear, say so.
- ❖ If spiritual values and traditions have been meaningful to you, speak with a clergy member or a friend who shares your beliefs. Make room for your faith to be part of the grieving process.
- ❖ When you feel stronger, volunteer your time to help in some manner of community service. Often when we are helping others, it helps us to feel better.

Eventually, you'll realize that you are able to concentrate more on the world around you and less on your feelings of grief. Healing is happening. The emotions may come and go for a long time, but you'll know that your life, though changed, will go on.

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