



A GUIDE TO GRIEF

Grief is a normal response to loss. It can be the loss of a home, job, marriage or a love one. Often the most painful loss is the death of a person you love, whether from a long illness or from an accident or an act of violence.

This guide will help you understand the grief you and others may feel after a death, whether sudden or anticipated. We hope this guide will help you realize that these feelings are not unusual and things can get better. You are not alone.

The Grieving Process

Grief is painful and at times the pain seems unbearable. It is a combination of many emotions that come and go, sometimes without warning. Grieving is the period during which we actively experience these emotions. How long and how difficult the grieving period is depends on the relationship with the person who dies, the circumstances of the death, and the situation of the survivors. The length of time people grieve can be weeks, months, and even years. One thing is certain: grief does not follow a timetable, but it does ease over time.

Because grief is so painful, some people try to “get over” a loss by denying the pain. Studies show that when people don’t deal with the emotions of grief, the pain does not go away. It remains with them, and can turn up in unrecognizable and sometimes destructive ways. Understanding the emotions of grief and its feeling and symptoms are important steps in healing and in helping others who may be grieving.

The Feelings and Symptoms of Grief

Experts describe the process of grieving and the emotions of grief in various ways. The most commonly described reactions are: Shock, Denial, Anger, Guilt, Depression, Acceptance, and Growth. Some people experience the grieving process in this order. Most often, a person feels several of these emotions at the same time, perhaps in different degrees.

Shock

If the death comes suddenly, as in an accident or murder, shock is often the first response people feel. Even if the death is anticipated, there may be disbelief at its finality. A person may be numb, or, like a robot, be able to go through the motions of life while actually feeling little. At the same time, physical symptoms such as confusion and loss of appetite are common.

Denial

Shock and denial are nature's way of softening the immediate blow of death. Denial can follow soon after the initial shock. People may know their loved one has died, but some part of them can't yet accept the reality of the death. It is not uncommon to fantasize that the deceased will walk through the door, as if nothing has happened. Some people leave bedrooms unchanged or make future plans as if the loved one will participate, just as in the past.

Anger

Anger is normal. It may be directed at the deceased for leaving and causing a sense of abandonment, or at the doctors and nurses who did not do enough, or at a murderer who killed without remorse. People of faith may feel anger at God, for allowing so much pain and anguish. Anger may also be directed at oneself for not saving the life of the loved one. It can be a mild feeling or a raging irrational emotion. It can test one's faith in religion or even in the goodness of life.

Guilt

Few survivors escape some feeling of guilt and regret. "I should have done more" are words that haunt many people. Were angry words exchanged? Most people are very creative in finding reasons for guilt. So many things could have been done differently "if only I had known."

Sadness

Sadness is the most inevitable emotion of grief. It is normal to feel abandoned, alone and afraid. After the shock and denial have passed and the anger has been exhausted, sadness and even hopelessness may set in. A person may have little energy to do even the simplest daily chores. Crying episodes may seem endless.

Acceptance

Time alone will not heal grief. Acknowledging the loss and experiencing the pain may free the survivor from a yearning to return to the past. Accepting life without the lost loved one may give way to a new perspective about the future. Acceptance does not mean forgetting, but rather using the memories to create a new life without the loved one. Hoping for things to be as they were may be replaced by a search for new relationships and new activities.

Growth

Grief is a chance for personal growth. For many people, it may eventually lead to renewed energy to invest in new activities and new relationships. Some people seek meaning in their loss and get involved in causes or projects that help others.

Some people find a new compassion in themselves as a result of the pain they have suffered. They may become more sensitive to others, thus enabling richer relationships. Others find new strength and independence they never knew they had. After the loss, they find new emotional resources that had not been apparent before.

The Experience of Grief

Grieving people have two choices: they can avoid the pain and all the other emotions associated with their loss and continue on, hoping to forget. This is a risky choice, since experience shows that grief, when ignored, continues to cause pain.

The other choice is to recognize grieving and seek healing and growth. Getting over a loss is slow, hard work. In order for growth to be possible, it is essential to allow oneself to feel all the emotions that arise, as painful as they may be, and to treat oneself with patience and kindness.

Feel the Pain.

Give into it - even give it precedence over other emotions and activities, because grief is a pain that will get in the way later if it is ignored. Realize that grief has no timetable; it is cyclical, so expect the emotions to come and go for weeks, months or even years. While a show of strength is admirable, it does not serve the need to express sadness, even when it comes out at unexpected times and places.

Talk About Your Sorrow.

Take the time to seek comfort from friends who will listen. Let them know you need to talk about your loss. People will understand, although they may not know how to respond. If they change the subject, explain that you need to share your memories and express your sorrow.

Forgive Yourself.

Forgive yourself for all the things you believe you should have said or done. Also forgive yourself for the anger and guilt and embarrassment you may have felt while grieving.

Eat Well and Exercise.

Grief is exhausting. To sustain your energy, be sure to maintain a balanced diet. Exercise is also important in sustaining energy. Find a routine that suits you - perhaps walks or bike rides with friends, or in solitude. Clear your mind and refresh your body.

Indulge Yourself.

Take naps, read a good book, listen to your favorite music, get a manicure, go to a ball game, rent a movie. Do something that is frivolous, distracting and that you personally find comforting.

Prepare for Holidays and Anniversaries.

Many people feel especially "blue" during these periods, and the anniversary date of the death can be especially painful. Even if you think you've progressed, these dates may bring back some of your painful emotions. Make arrangements to be with friends and family members with whom you are comfortable. Plan activities that give you an opportunity to mark the anniversary.

Get Help.

Bereavement groups can help you recognize your feelings and put them in perspective. They can also help alleviate the feeling that you are alone. The experience of sharing with others who are in a similar situation can be comforting and reassuring. Sometimes, new friendships grow through these groups - even a whole new social network that you did not have before.

There are specialized groups for widowed persons, for parents who have lost a child, for victims of drunken drivers, etc. There are also groups that do not specialize. Check with your local hospice or other bereavement support groups for more information.

If you find that you are in great distress or in long-term depression, individual or group therapy from a counselor who specializes in grief may be advisable. You can ask your doctor for a referral.

Take Active Steps to Create a New Life for Yourself.

Give yourself as much time to grieve as you need. Once you find new energy, begin to look for interesting things to do. Take courses, donate time to a cause you support, meet new people, or even find a new job.

It is often tempting to try to replace the person who has been lost. Whether through adoption, remarriage, or other means; this form of reconciliation often does not work.

Many people discover that there is hope after death. Death takes away, but grief can give back. It is possible to recover from grief with new strengths and a new direction. By acting on our grief, we may eventually find peace and purpose.

Helping Those in Grief

You may know someone who has experienced a loss. Many of us feel awkward when someone dies, and don't know what to do or say. The suggestions below are designed to help you help friends, family and coworkers who are grieving.

Reach Out to the Grieving Person.

Show your interest and share your caring feelings. Saying the wrong thing is better than saying nothing at all. At the same time, avoid clichés like "It was God's will," or "God never gives us more than we can bear", or "At least she isn't suffering." Do not say you know how it feels. Do say you are sorry and that you are available to listen. Be prepared for emotional feelings yourself. A death generates questions and fears about our own mortality.

Listen

Your greatest gift to a grieving person can be your willingness to listen. Ask about the deceased. Allowing the person to talk freely without fear of disapproval helps to create healthy memories. It is an important part of healing. While you can't resolve the grief, listening can help.

Ask How You Can Help.

Taking over a simple task at home or at work is not only helpful, it also offers reassurance that you care. Be specific in your offer to do something and then follow up with action.

Remember Holidays and Anniversaries.

These can be a very difficult time for those who are in grief. Do not allow the person to be isolated. Remember to share your home, yourself, or anything that may be of comfort.

Suggest Activities That You Can Do Together.

Walking, biking or other exercises can be an opportunity to talk, and a good source of energy for a tired body and mind.

Help the Grieving Person Find New Activities and Friends.

Include grieving persons in your life. Grieving people may require some encouragement to get back into social situations. Be persistent, but try not to press them to participate before they are ready.

Pay Attention to Danger Signs.

Signs that the grieving person is in distress might include weight loss, substance abuse, depression, prolonged sleep disorders, physical problems, talk about suicide, and lack of personal hygiene.

Observing these signs may mean the grieving person needs professional help. If you feel this is the case, a suggestion from you (if you feel close enough to the person), or from a trusted friend or family member may be appropriate. You might also want to point out community resources that may be helpful.

Death can be a painful and permanent loss experience, and one of the hardest from which to recover. Death takes away, but facing it and grieving can result in peace, new strengths and purpose.