

How to Work Through Your Grief

WHAT IS GRIEF?

Grief is the reaction to a loss. This does not only refer to the loss of a loved one, but can also include the loss of opportunities, goals, relationships or previous routines.

Mourning is the outward expression of grief: talking about the deceased, celebrating their life, crying or hugging relatives.

Grief is a process, not an event and will take time to work through. It can affect all aspects of your life: *emotionally* (feelings, thoughts, perceptions), *socially* (relationships with others) and *physically* (changes to your body, aches and pains). You may find yourself searching for new meanings or questioning your beliefs and values.

- The purpose of grieving is to:
 - Accept the reality of the loss.
 - Work through your feelings and thoughts in order to incorporate the loss into your life.
 - Adapt to the changes and allow yourself to move forward with life.
- There is no such thing as “normal” grief, it is *personal* and influenced by many factors:
 - Nature of the relationship with the deceased.
 - Cause of death and the situation (expected, unexpected).
 - Characteristics of the bereaved individual: personality, religion, age, gender, support available.

Literature is available that provides explanations of the different “stages” of grief and the feelings that a bereaved person “should” experience. Although these might serve as guidelines and can include some characteristics of grief, the process is *not predictable*. There is no definite order of events that must occur.

- You will survive your grief, despite how hard and painful it might be. Remember that recovering from a loss and moving on with life should not be a source of guilt; it does not mean you do not love or miss the deceased.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT WHEN GRIEVING?

Healing from a loss does not occur overnight. It takes time and patience to confront and overcome your emotions, as well as return to daily activities and a functional routine. Grieving is work: it takes a toll on both physical and emotional energy and can leave you feeling exhausted.

Everyone experiences grief differently and must work through their grief as individuals. Avoid comparing your grief pattern and reactions to others. You do not need to grieve according to someone else’s timetable, instead make this experience your own. Some people will be open with expressing their feelings; others will become more reclusive and may not feel anything at all.

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Move at your own pace, do whatever makes you feel comfortable and don't force yourself to feel something that you are not. People may comment that you should be "back to normal soon" or "it's been a few months, you should be better by now". Try not to let this pressure you to change the way you are grieving. Reassure yourself and inform others that grief is different for everyone and that maybe you are moving at a slower rate than they expected.

The experience of grief is full of highs and lows. These lows may be intense and frequent at first, but over time they will become less severe and occur less often. Certain days will be harder than others as they may be strongly linked to memories of the deceased or the circumstances of the death: holidays, anniversaries, family get-togethers, photos or places.

Expect that you may be overwhelmed and surprised by the wave of feelings you are experiencing. At times you may feel that you are going crazy or are out of control. You may be confronted with thoughts or emotions that you have never had before. As well, emotions can be conflicting. For example you may be sad and longing for the loved one to come back, while at the same time angry at them for abandoning you.

Your relationships with others may change.

This can include your relations with your spouse, children, friends, or colleagues at work. Some people will be willing to accommodate you through your grief by offering support, comfort and by being a good listener. Others, will be unable to understand what you are experiencing and may not be willing to tolerate your grief. It may be helpful to inform others of how you are feeling and your needs for coping with the loss. At times, you may have to learn to be patient with those who interpret your grief differently.

Grief may not be immediate.

It may take days or weeks for the reality of the loss to set in. Grief emotions may be felt in response to another event that somehow triggered memories of the loss. As well, there may be a time when you feel that you have recovered and that things are "going back to normal" when suddenly you are faced with intense emotions.

You may not be able to return exactly to the way you were before the death.

Parts of the grief may stay with you forever. Confronting the loss, however, will allow you to incorporate the death into your life and move on with new experiences without forgetting about the deceased.

WHAT FEELINGS ARE "NORMAL"?

"Normal" is not a good word to use in describing emotions because in reality there are a broad range of emotions and reactions that can be experienced when grieving a loss. What is important is that you give yourself permission to feel the way you do. Accept your feelings as being real and work on finding constructive ways to channel them.

How to Work Through Your Grief (continued)

- **Shock and numbness:** When the death occurs you might be asking yourself “is this a joke?”, “is it really happening?”, “no, this is a mistake”, “it’s just a bad dream”. Cognitively you understand the loss, but emotionally you cannot accept that the loved one is gone. You may be in a state of disbelief.
- **Denial:** You may want to avoid the pain of the loss all together by pretending it did not happen, or by carrying on with your regular routines. For the time immediately following the death, this can be expected. However, in order to successfully recover, it is important to accept the loss and give in to your emotions in order to deal with them constructively.
- **Confusion:** You find yourself having difficulty concentrating and completing simple, everyday tasks. You might feel disorganized, forgetful and unable to make decisions. This is a common reaction – you are not going crazy.
- **Anger and resentment:** It is natural to want to protest against the death. Anger can be exhibited not only through rage, but also through being irritable, annoyed, agitated and frustrated. You may be mad at the deceased for abandoning you, at the doctors or nurses for not curing the disease or towards your friends for not saying the right things. You may even be angry at yourself for not visiting the loved one enough during the illness.
- **Jealousy:** You may experience feelings of jealousy towards friends, coworkers or family members for not having experienced a loss or having to work through the pain.
- **Guilt:** You may feel guilty about something you said to the deceased and regret, of not being supportive enough, not visiting enough or in thinking that you may have caused the death. You might be running over different scenarios in your head such as “what if...” and “if only...”.
- **Relief:** You may be thankful that your loved one is no longer suffering and that their long battle with the illness is over. Being an active caregiver of the deceased during their illness is a time consuming and stressful job; you might be relieved that this is over. This is a feeling bereaved individuals may not admit to, but is natural nonetheless and should not be a source of guilt.
- **Anxious:** You may feel as if you are in a state of panic or fear. This can be caused from having a lack of control over the situation or feeling insecure and vulnerable. You may worry about how you will be able to go on with life without the deceased or that other loved ones may die.
- **Sadness:** You may feel hurt and pained that someone you love has been taken away from you. You may have a sense of longing for the deceased to come back so that life can return to the way it once was.

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- **Loneliness:** The feeling of being abandoned or empty inside because the person is gone. You may feel that no one understands you, or you cannot relate to others. This may create a sense of isolation.
- **Withdrawal:** For a time you may have less interest in interacting with others, or participating in activities you once used to like. You may withdraw socially, become less communicative, and more private. This can be an important time for inward reflection, but is usually only temporary.

WHAT PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS MAY BE EXPERIENCED?

- Changes in eating pattern
- Have less energy
- Uncontrollable crying
- Feeling empty and heavy
- Feel weak
- Upset stomach or nausea
- Difficulty sleeping or getting up in the morning
- Weight gain or weight loss
- Tightness of the throat or in chest
- Dizziness, headaches
- Restless
- Tremble, chills
- Irritable

HOW LONG WILL GRIEF LAST?

There is no definite time limit on grief because the experience is individual: everyone reacts to loss differently. Avoid giving in to the belief that you will just “get over” the grief but instead find a way of coping with it. In fact, some aspects of the loss will stay with you forever.

- After 2-4 months, many individuals are able to start carrying out daily activities or routines. Severe emotions and stress are often lessened or do not feel that they are weighing you down.

This does not mean you will not still be hurting or that you have forgotten about the deceased. You may feel that you are betraying your loved one by adapting to life without them. Remember that it is okay to go back to previous activities and allow yourself to be happy again; this is an important step towards recovery.

- For many bereaved individuals, it takes at least a year or two to move through the grief process and adapt to a new way of life without their loved one.

Be aware that you may encounter a situation, memory or feeling that triggers the grief surrounding a loss, even when you think you may be fully recovered. This can occur many months or years later. For example, the recent death of a friend might bring up the pain of a grandparent’s death, or turning the age at which parent or sibling died might be a source of distress.

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- If it has been more than 6 months and you still cannot get out of bed or feel unable to carry out daily activities (work, grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, driving) than you may need to consult a therapist or doctor.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MYSELF COPE WITH A LOSS?

Recognize the reality of the loss.

This includes questioning what happened, protesting the death and replaying the event in your mind. Once the death is acknowledged and you are no longer in shock, you can focus on your emotions of grief; this can be difficult and painful but is important in healing.

Accept the emotions we are feeling, and face them.

The topic of death is avoided in our society, and often openly expressing emotions is considered a sign of weakness. Denying your emotions because you think they are wrong might contribute to more distress and force you to act as if everything is okay when it is not. There is nothing wrong with grieving; it is a normal and important part of healing. Don't be embarrassed if you cry all of a sudden, need to do physical activity as an outlet, or want to talk out loud to the deceased.

Talk to someone you trust and feel comfortable sharing your feelings and thoughts with.

This may be a friend, counselor, family doctor, nurse or spiritual/religious leader. It is important that the person is a good listener, and will be supportive of you. Try not to choose someone grieving the loss of the same person. Even though your family is a source of love and support they might be deeply grieving as well. Some find it hard to openly express their thoughts or are uncomfortable sharing with others; it might be helpful to write down what you are feeling in a diary or letter to the deceased.

Avoid judging yourself.

Try not to evaluate how you are feeling based on other people's experiences of grief. Often setting deadlines or outlining stages of how you should deal with your grief is detrimental and discouraging. Focus on what you are experiencing and your own needs. If you aren't crying or acting sad and do not feel the need to share with others this does not mean you are not mourning the death.

Take breaks.

Grief can be difficult and overwhelming and you cannot expect yourself to be grieving at all times. Allow yourself to take in the reality and the emotions of the loss bit by bit rather than all at once. Take time away from your grief by doing something else such as exercising, shopping, and going to a movie or reading a book. This is an excellent time to rejuvenate and keep your energy up.

It is okay to talk about the deceased if you feel comfortable.

Friends and family might avoid talking about the deceased around you in fear that you might become upset or offended. It is important to inform others when you feel you are ready to talk about your loved one. Reassure them that you might become upset or show emotion but that this is part of your experience.

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Participate in activities and hobbies that you enjoy or find relaxing.

This can include: sports (biking, rollerblading, and soccer), reading, listening to music, gardening or crafts. These may help in getting you back to a pattern or routine. Try not to make yourself feel bad for laughing or having a good time. This is a healthy part of recovering and is not disrespectful to your loved one.

Accept help from others.

Don't be afraid to accept or ask for help from friends and family, even if it is just to help clean the house, or cook a meal. You will need outside support to get through this difficult time.

Physical health.

Try to maintain a balanced lifestyle: eat healthy foods, drink lots of water and avoid alcohol and caffeine. This will help you in recovering from some of the physical symptoms of grief and provide energy to get through your day. Exercising can also help with sleeping; try to get out for a walk or do an activity with friends/family.

Rest.

Give yourself time to rest, especially if you are having trouble sleeping. Read a book, watch a movie or listen to favorite music. You may not be able to sleep, but taking a moment to relax and take your mind off your grief is just as important.

Remove extra sources of stress in your life.

Free up your schedule, allowing yourself to say "no" to certain obligations, and postpone making major decisions or changes. Sometimes making "to-do" lists can be helpful.

Attend support groups.

Interact, share and learn from others who are grieving a loss. You may be surprised to find that aspects of their experiences are similar to yours. Support groups have helped many people in confronting their emotions and recovering from a significant loss. They provide a supportive environment where many individuals feel comfortable sharing.

For more information about available support groups contact a local hospice, hospital, or counseling clinic.

REFERENCES:

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- Sally S. Roach & Beatriz C. Nieto - *Healing and the Grief Process.*
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- "Grieving." *Home Care Guide for Advanced Cancer.* American College of Physicians. 1997. American College of Physicians website www.acponline.org/public/h_care/10-griev.htm

BOOKLETS:

- "Grief and relationships", "The journey of grief". *Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota, Healing Quilt.*