

Experiencing Grief

Grieving comes to most of us at some point in our lives. In fact, statistics show that each person can expect to experience the loss of a loved one once every nine to thirteen years. The resulting sadness may be the most painful of life's experiences. Because it is painful, however, our eventual adaptation to the loss can bring meaning and integrity to our lives – and this, ultimately, is a gift to us from the one we have lost. It is a reminder to us that the circle is unbroken.

Our ability to adapt to loss is an important feature of the course of our lives. Change can instigate growth. Loss can give rise to gain. If we do not grieve the loss, however, it may drain us of energy and interfere with our living fully in the present. If we are not able to mourn at all, we may spend our lives under the spell of old issues and past relationships – living in the past and failing to connect with the experiences of the present.

Grieving is a process of experiencing our reactions to loss. It is similar to *mourning*. The term *bereavement* means the state, not the process, of suffering from a loss. Normal grieving is an expected part of the process of recuperating from a loss. The intensity of the process comes as a surprise to most people – and for many it becomes one of their most significant life experiences. People have their own individual grief responses. No two people will experience the process in the same way.

The first reaction to the loss of a loved one, even when the loss is expected, is usually a sense of disbelief, shock, numbness, and bewilderment. The survivor may experience a period of denial in which the reality of the loss is put out of mind. This reaction provides the person some time to prepare to deal with the inevitable pain.

The feeling of numbness then turns to intense suffering. The person feels empty. There are constant reminders of the one who has been lost. There may be periods of increased energy and anxiety followed by times of deep sadness, lethargy, and fatigue. There may be a period of prolonged despair as the person slowly begins to accept the loss. The one who grieves may find it difficult to feel pleasure and it may seem easier most of the time to avoid other people. The bereaved may dream repeatedly about the lost loved one – or hear their voice or even actually see them. The grieving survivor may adopt some mannerisms of the one who has left.

Sadness may be interspersed with times of intense anger. Many of us have difficulty in expressing anger toward one who has died. (However, anger enters into most of our relationships, and the relationship with the one who has died does continue, though changed, even after death.) We may reproach ourselves for not doing enough to prevent the death or for having treated the deceased badly in the past. The grieving person may become irritable and quarrelsome – and may interpret signs of good will from others as messages of rejection. Normal stressors may become triggers that set off periods of deep anger.

Physical symptoms commonly accompany grief. These include weakness, sleep disturbance, a change in appetite, shortness of breath, dizziness, headaches, back pain, gastric reflux, or heart palpitations.

Some people may show a “flight into health,” as if the loss were behind them and they had started to move on again. This pattern occurs frequently, especially in a society which encourages quick fixes, even though complete resolution of the grief process can take up to two or three years. To shorten the process by pretending that it has been completed is to invite a prolongation of the symptoms.

Suggestions for Experiencing Grief

All of us grieve in different ways, depending on the circumstances of the death, our own personal characteristics, and the meanings attached to the death by those left behind. Nonetheless, there are some specific actions that most of us can take to complete the process in a way that allows us to move on, eventually, to a whole and meaningful life again.

Allow yourself to grieve and feel the depth of your loss. Grieving is hard work. We may feel that we should be “strong” and hold in our emotions, that happy thoughts and feelings are the only way to get through a trying time. This approach, however, makes it very difficult to complete the process of grieving. It is important to accept the reality of the loss. The person who died is gone and will not return. This fact must be accepted in order for the grief process to continue. Try to understand why the death occurred and the events that led to the death. Give yourself permission to feel and think about whatever comes up regarding your loss. If happy thoughts and feelings come your way, allow them to happen. Similarly, if dreadful pain, sadness, and anxiety show up, when tears turn to uncontrollable sobs, give in to these temporary feelings. Embrace your sadness, know it, and make it your own. If it is difficult to open yourself to these feelings, it may help to make a personal commitment to complete the grief process in the near future. Vow to yourself that for your own benefit, for the good of others in your life and for your future happiness, that you need to get through your loss completely and in a healthy way. This means opening yourself up to all of your feelings and thoughts, both positive and negative, and letting them happen.

Accept the help of others and let them know what you need. Don’t try to do it alone. This is the cardinal rule in grief work. Isolation is bad for most people, and it is especially harmful for a person who is grieving. Research shows that people who have social support complete the grieving process better than those who try it in isolation. Social support should be available to you during the entire grieving process, but especially initially after the death. Find people who can be trusted absolutely and can listen well. We need to share the intense thoughts and feelings that we experience when we are alone. It is during the time of grieving that many people look for the help of a professional therapist who is likely better prepared than most to empathize with you and guide the process productively. Other people give you a sense of security and reality when your life has been turned upside down by the loss of a loved one. Accepting the help of others during mourning is not a sign of weakness. It simply means that you can allow yourself to be comforted during a rough period, and this will contribute to your strength later. Sometimes other people may not know what you need, even if their intentions are good. In this case, it is important to educate them. If they say the wrong things, let them know. If there are specific things that you need, tell them. Assertiveness may be difficult during grieving because you have little energy, but clear communication is essential to getting your needs met.

Be realistic in processing your grief. Read up on grief work or talk to a therapist who can describe the grief process. Understand what you are trying to accomplish, and realize that your pain will subside in time. There is a clear goal in sight. Understand what this death means to you and what issues it brings up for you. The loss may be there always, but you can come to understand it and feel comfortable with yourself in time. Accept the fact that you will have some reactions during the process that you may not like – angry blowups, ignoring other people, moodiness. Expect your loss to dredge up intense emotions, although these feelings will pass in time. Your way of grieving is particular to you and your individual loss. It is not helpful to blame or to be blamed for the unique way each of us grieves. Don’t let the personal judgments of others determine how or to what degree you should grieve. Your grieving is your own.

Find ways to express your feelings. The expression of emotion is one of the most important aspects of the grieving process. Each of us has different ways of expressing feelings. Some of us talk about them,

while others prefer to write them in a journal or physically act out the feelings (pounding a pillow or punching bag, running, or dancing). Look for trusted and nonjudgmental people in your support system who are able to hear you talk at length, cry until you can't anymore, and review your experiences with the deceased. Expressing your feelings is a crucial part of the grief experience.

Submit to the grief process and take care of your needs. Even though grieving is hard work, and we may prefer to avoid it, there is no way around it. There is a major disruption in your life when a loved one dies and this entails a period of re-adjustment. Here are some real-life concerns to keep in mind during the grief process.

- **Give yourself some quiet time alone.** Find a good balance between being around others and giving yourself some solitude so that you can reflect on your loss and process your feelings.
- **Allow yourself to have some breaks from your grief.** Grieving is difficult. As in any hard job, you need a break from it from time to time. Go out and try to have a good time with friends. Read a good book. Lose yourself in a good movie.
- **If possible, avoid making long-term decisions.** Times of crisis decrease our ability to make rational decisions. Put decisions off until things have settled down to a more stable pattern.
- **Take care of your health.** Grief is a time of high physical risk. Even though it may be difficult, try to get some physical exercise, even if it is only a daily walk. Maintain a nutritious diet, but don't avoid indulging in special treats occasionally since self-nurturing is important during the process. Above all, avoid alcohol and drugs during this time. They may provide a temporary feeling of relief, but your goal should focus on grieving productively, not avoiding it.

Grieving is a very personal experience and one of our most painful to endure. It is also a journey into the depths of our lives that can ultimately reveal our strength of character.

“Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break.”

– *William Shakespeare*

(*Macbeth*, Act IV, Scene 3)

“When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.”

– *Kahlil Gibran*

Some Thoughts on Grieving

Losses are a fact of life.

Every relationship is only temporary.

I need to be as aware as possible of what is happening.

I will not always feel the way I do now.

Tears are a sign of strength, not weakness.

My loved one would want me to get on with life again.

I am willing to give this all the time it takes.

I need to do a lot of talking and crying – as much as it takes.

My loved one's departure allows me to find out more about who I am.

My life has been disrupted, and now I will work to get it back on track again.

I need to share my experience with other human beings.

My grieving is my own – I, and not others, will determine what form it takes.

Nobody else can take this life journey for me.

I will be happy again.