

Grief and Loss: Getting Over the Death of Someone Close to You

Introduction

The death of someone we love, a close friend or family member, is an event we all have to face sometime. Learning to survive the feelings of sadness and loss is a process that is normal and usually time-limited. The process involves both emotional and behavioral reactions. It takes us through the initial response of shock and sadness, through acceptance and understanding, and eventually to the rebuilding of our lives.

There are many ways, some better than others, in which people learn to adjust to the death of a loved one. This brochure will help you understand your grief and give you some ideas about how you may be able to help yourself through the grieving process.

What Are the Tasks of Mourning?

The death of someone we care about most often means the loss of a valued personal relationship. In response to this loss, we experience many physical, emotional, and behavioral reactions. Yet grieving for the loss of a loved one and allowing ourselves to experience the pain is natural and necessary.

Accepting the reality of the loss - This first task is often difficult because of the sense of shock and numbness we experience. It is common to maintain hope that somehow "all of this is a mistake" and that the deceased is not really dead. As we struggle to accept the reality of the death, we may even misidentify others and believe that we have seen the deceased individual. Typically, this feeling that the death is somehow not real tends to lessen, although there may be some recurrences as the process continues.

Experiencing the pain of grief - This task that must be accomplished for the process of healing to occur. Because the feelings of loss tend to be very painful, we may feel like avoiding the intensity of these difficult emotions. It is as if by not experiencing the pain we can somehow avoid the reality that someone we care about is dead.

The reality, however, is that we cannot avoid the pain of grief forever. We will experience confusion, sadness, dismay, yearning, and probably anger. We may even experience physical symptoms such as palpitations, nausea, dizziness, tightness in the throat, and digestive problems. Sadness and an overwhelming sense of loss may be fairly pervasive feelings during mourning. Expressing the sadness is often difficult. While some of us may be able to cry, others may feel a need to hold in their feelings. This may be particularly true of men; however, it is also common for all of us to be praised for "holding up well" and not expressing feelings.

The difficulty is that by holding in feelings, we can do nothing about them except hold them. In essence, we put our emotional life on hold, which prevents us from healing. On the other hand, by expressing our feelings, by crying and thus physically releasing the sadness, we can begin to move forward and to heal from the loss.

It is often difficult to admit that part of our grief and sense of loss is also mixed with anger that we have been abandoned by someone we cared about. Depending on the level of closeness, the feelings of abandonment can be devastating and can arouse a sense of anger. We may become angry at God, at the unfairness of the world, at the deceased, and even at ourselves. We may question our own behavior and be angry for not having been the "right kind" of friend, spouse, partner, lover, brother, or sister. All of this anger is normal, and it is all probably accompanied by a tremendous sense of guilt.

Most of us come to associate anger with something that is bad. So when we experience anger directed at someone we care about, we quickly feel guilty. This is particularly true when the object of our anger is deceased. Another type of guilt that may also be present is survivor guilt: guilt that we are alive when one we care about is dead. Often this sentiment is expressed in statements such as "I wish it had been me," or "Why was I spared?" These

feelings, too, are normal. Yet resolution of grief may hinge, at least in part, on our willingness to admit and resolve our anger and our guilt.

Adjusting to life without the deceased

This will entail a variety of emotional and behavioral changes. A sense of despair, disorganization, and anxiety may emerge, and taking care of everyday tasks may become difficult. New behaviors and skills may need to be developed and that may be distressing. Yet redefining these experiences in a way that promotes the healing needed to fulfill these new roles and tasks appears to ease this adjustment.

Emotionally detaching from the deceased and investing that emotional energy into other relationships - The final task of mourning, this is often the most difficult. Most of us feel guilty at the thought of detaching from the deceased. We feel we are not being loyal or faithful to what was, especially when the deceased provided emotional nurturance. But if we do not detach, life for us as survivors may stop emotionally. Holding onto past attachments prevents us from finding new sources of nurturance and support. This does not mean we are abandoning our memories and thoughts, or that we love the deceased any less. It does mean that we must realize that there are other people to be loved.

When the tasks of mourning are accomplished, we can then remember the deceased without pain, though we may still experience some sadness.

What Can I Do To Accomplish the Tasks of Mourning?

Moving through the process of mourning can sometimes be eased by finding support from our social and cultural practices as well as from perhaps more personal resources. Seeking support and using these resources can help us recover from the death of a loved one.

Participate in Social and Cultural Rituals

Cultural practices seem to acknowledge the wisdom of expressing grief, though not all cultures handle this expression in the same way. Many cultures surround the death of one of its members with elaborate ceremony while others acknowledge the loss more privately. The cultural rituals for dealing with death (e.g., wakes, funerals, etc.) seem designed to offer us an opportunity to express our sadness in the socially and culturally accepted manner. They can give other people the opportunity to comfort us and show concern as a way to remind us that we have other loving connections, that life goes on, and that we are not alone in our feelings of loss and grief. Participating in the ceremony and ritual of bereavement also seems to aid family and friends in the adjustment to such a personal loss.

Some families and friends choose to create their own rituals to commemorate the birthday or day of death of their loved one. A visit to the gravesite, lighting a candle, and special gatherings are ways bereaved individuals can support one another and share memories.

Find and Use Support Systems

Finding the support of family members and sharing the pain of loss with them can make a tremendous difference, even though not every family member will handle the loss in the same way. Sometimes when a member of the family dies, other family members have difficulty talking with each other about the death. This is partly due to the painful feelings and also partly due to the belief that somehow talking will "upset" others even more. Thus family members may feel cut off from each other at precisely the time when they need to feel close and be supportive of each other. Individuals who have survived the death of a family member or others close to

the family consistently stress the importance of talking, remembering, crying, and sharing feelings with their family. This seems to have been a very significant part of recovering from the grief.

Friends are another source of support. One of the best ways to help yourself is to talk about your loss with someone who is caring and concerned, someone who can understand your need to talk about it. Often just talking with a close friend can soften the feelings of losing a spouse, lover, good friend, or family member. Sharing thoughts and feelings can help to maintain relationships that can counteract some of the feelings of loneliness a death evokes.

Counselors and others who have been trained to help in the grieving process can also provide support and assistance. Typically, we need to go over and over the feelings and the experiences before we can begin to accept what has happened. Sometimes as survivors we feel as though we may be burdening our family and friends with our need to talk. If this feeling occurs, seeking help from a counselor is probably a good idea. Perhaps only with someone outside of the circle of family and friends can we allow ourselves to talk about our angry feelings, our self-blame and guilt, and our sadness.

Depending on the particular nature of our spiritual selves, some of us will seek the guidance and support of a spiritual leader. The person may be called pastor, priest, shaman, rabbi, healer, spiritual guide, mother, imam, elder, bishop, father, or holy person; seeking their support can often aid us in dealing with death. For most, when someone we love dies, questions of faith, the presence or absence of an afterlife, and the meaning of life and death often surface. Talking with someone about these issues can often aid us in understanding the death of someone we love as well as our own loss.

Return To Life

We each have our own way of surviving losses. Some of us will seek solitude and find that the well-intentioned inquiries and expressions of sympathy from others only revive the pain. However, as in recovering from any trauma, physical or mental, a progressive return to our usual life of work, family, and friends is most important. The longer we put it off, the slower our recovery will be. We can begin to help ourselves by thinking through the challenges of starting to live without the deceased person. Perhaps outlining a schedule of the day-to-day tasks can help us to structure our day and get us moving back into a normal routine. Reconnecting with friends, going back to work or school, and beginning to pick up the threads of our lives can help us to deal with feelings of numbness, lethargy, and paralysis.

Attending to our physical needs is essential during this time. Get enough sleep. Go to bed a bit earlier and sleep a bit later. Plan your meals so that you are eating properly. Work some exercise into your daily routine. Remember just as our emotional self is affected by the loss of a loved one, so is our physical self. Even having a physical exam by a physician can help us to take care of ourselves as we continue to heal.

When is Grieving Finished?

Although there are no timetables for determining when grieving is over, many experts agree that it is not unusual for the mourning process to take at least a year. Of course this varies depending on your relationship with the deceased, amount of support, and other personal factors. Remember it takes about a year to go through all of the birthdays, holidays, special events, and other important dates that will be experienced for the first time without the loved one. Though the intensity of the loss may ebb and flow during this period of time, grief lasting for at least a year is not uncommon and can be expected. Generally, the longer a close relationship had existed before the death, the longer the recovery process takes.

When Grieving Becomes More Complicated

Sometimes the normal grieving process becomes more complicated. Sleep and appetite disturbances, reduced sex drive, and marked preoccupation with thoughts about the deceased may be signs of increased difficulty in dealing

with the death. Sometimes our feeling of loss may seem so tragic and pervasive that we believe we can no longer go on. Such feelings of despair and hopelessness may even lead us to think about suicide. Sometimes because of special life circumstances, our grieving may be marked by confusion because we seem not to be feeling how we think we should. Perhaps we feel relief or maybe even a hint of joy. Regardless of the specific feeling, if we are feeling contrary to the way that we think we should feel, then confusion and guilt may arise. If you are experiencing some of these problems, you may need some special help.

Counseling can give you an opportunity to talk about the lost relationship with all of its ups and downs. Sometimes even talking about parallels to previous relationships with unhappy outcomes can free us to move forward with life and new love relationships. Working through the many feelings surrounding the death of a loved one is crucial. It is important to know that no matter how badly we feel, we can overcome the grief and can go on to live full and happy lives again. At this time, however, we may need a little more help than we usually do. Even the use of a mild medication prescribed by a psychiatrist can be helpful in this kind of situation.

If your distress is persistent and is disrupting your life and your ability to carry on basic functions, please get help! Don't keep yourself isolated and alone with your pain!

Things to Remember

Do:

- Talk to others who have experienced loss.
- Speak of the meaning of the loss to you, the ways in which you will miss the deceased.
- Seek support directly from those that are able to give it. A hug may be important.
- Stay with a routine, stick to a schedule, even if you feel you are just going through the motions.
- Recognize the feelings for what they are rather than why they are. Knowing what the feeling is can help in dealing with it.
- Use writing, art, and music to let out your feelings and thoughts.
- Be forgiving and patient with yourself. It is all right to make mistakes or lose your concentration.
- Be good to yourself. Take the rest you need, the walk you enjoy, the gift you would like.
- Give yourself time. Time does heal, but how long it takes is an individual thing.
- Seek guidance from a source that can offer you both wisdom and empathy.

Do not:

- Try to make major life decisions too quickly.
- Numb your pain with depressive chemicals such as alcohol or other drugs.
- Deny your feelings.
- Isolate or hide out from yourself and others
- Expect every day to get better. Accept ups and downs.

(Adapted from Colgrove, et al., 1991)

Written Material

Colgrove, M., Bloomfield, H. H., & McWilliams, P. (1991). How to survive the loss of a love. Los Angeles, CA: Prelude Press. This is a very readable and practical handbook. It is applicable to a variety of losses in addition to death. It is the sort of book that you can pick up and read in sections as you need it or as it applies to your situation.

Gravelle, K. & Haskins, C. (1989). Teenagers face to face with bereavement. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Julian Messner. This book is particularly good for persons who are trying to help a teen deal with the death of a close friend or family member. It describes some of the unique features of adolescent grief. Some sections may be helpful for teens to read.

Kushner, H. S. (1981). When bad things happen to good people. New York: Avon. As an outgrowth of one man's recovery from the death of his son, this book seeks to aid people in their spiritual search for the meaning of such tragedy.

Richter, E. (1986). Losing someone you love: When a brother or sister dies. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. This book is written as a series of true stories about what it feels like to have a brother or sister die. Through the stories, those who read this book may come to understand the needs of siblings dealing with death. This book is particularly good for both. Young adults dealing with the death of a sibling as well as for those who are trying to help them.

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