

## **The Grief Experience**

The death of someone you love affects your whole being. The pain of grief overwhelms you, making you wonder if you will survive. Grief can seem to go on for a long time, raising feelings and thoughts in you that you had not dreamed possible. Each person handles grief in his or her own way; however your experiences will be similar to others.

**Shock is the initial reaction.** Whether or not this death has been expected, numbness and disbelief follow. Bewilderment; "I'm in a fog"; watching events happen around you but not feeling connected - all of these feelings protect you during these difficult first days. As the fog lifts, the reality of the loss begins to hit. You may be surprised by the physical changes in your body. Difficulty with sleep, change in appetite, tightness in the chest, lack of energy, dry mouth, "lump in the throat", muscle ache and pains, lack of energy, restlessness, fatigue whether or not you are physically active - are all ways your body reveals the stress you are under. This is a time when it is important to look after you.

Giving your body what it needs to function is important now. Moderate exercise, a daily walk, a swim, whatever you enjoy doing or has been your custom will give you physical and emotional release. Eating nutritious foods will provide your body with the nourishment it needs during this stressful time. Three meals a day may be difficult to manage, but choosing snacks of fruit, vegetable, cheese and avoiding "junk" foods, alcohol, caffeine and nicotine will help keep you in balance. You may feel unwell and this is quite normal. This is a good time to seek assistance from your family doctor.

**As you become more aware of your loss, your emotions can seem overwhelming.** Sadness fills your life. Tears may come easily, at times and in situations unexpected by you.

Crying is only one way to express your sadness. Sharing your thoughts with a supportive friend may help you, as you feel the pain of this loss. Some have kept a journal and find comfort as they put their thoughts and feelings into words. When your heart is broken, you will find ways to care for yourself. Think about what has been helpful to you in the past, or try something new - a soak in the tub, a professional massage, painting - you will discover what works for you. These activities will not take away the grief, but will give you needed breaks from the grief.

**You may find yourself pining or yearning for the person** - looking for them in a crowd, anticipating their return to the home. At times these may be so intense that you have the sense of hearing or smelling or touching or seeing the deceased. These experiences can be comforting, a reminder of the connection that was so strong between you. Some wonder if they are "going crazy;" others long to have these sensations of the deceased but do not.

Mother's Day, Father's Day, anniversaries, and birthdays - these bring strong reminders of the loss you are experiencing. Seeing couples enjoying each other's company or parents and children sharing special times may make you feel envious. It is natural that these special days and times will bring many memories. Planning for these times may be helpful. Some families continue with special days as they always have; others seek new ways to celebrate.

Often grievors find that the anticipation of the day is worse than the day itself. Many find it a bittersweet experience as they plan these days and celebrate them, remembering their special person with love and affection.

**You may find yourself angry, furious, and full of rage.** You may blame doctors, nurses for the circumstances of the death, funeral directors for not carrying out arrangements properly, family members for lack of support or God for allowing the death. These emotions are not right or wrong, good or bad - they are yours. When you keep these feelings within yourself, you may prolong your sadness. Try sharing these strong feelings with a trusted friend or counselor who does not judge you but walks this path of grief with you. These feelings will change in intensity and duration as you do the work of grief.

Sometimes you may feel that you didn't do enough - "If only I had made him go to the doctor earlier", "If only I had stayed at the hospital longer." - these feelings of guilt are natural responses to your loss. You may feel guilty that you have survived - "I was the one expected to go first."

You may feel ashamed as you experience the relief from care giving, financial strains, increased responsibilities, watching them suffer. There may be other things you do not miss - the overflowing ashtray, the "channel surfing", the unbalanced chequebook - and you may feel awkward about not missing these all the time. These feelings and thoughts are a natural response to your loss.

If you are having these kinds of thoughts, be compassionate, gentle, kind with yourself. Take the time to review them. Ask yourself, "What could I have done differently in that situation, knowing what I knew then?" Perhaps you could have handled it differently. There are, however, many things in life that cannot be changed. Be gentle and forgiving with yourself as you talk and think about this.

**As the realities of what your loss means to you become clear, feelings of anxiety, panic and fear may arise.** "How will I survive without this person?", "Am I going to be next?"; "I cannot handle this", "I'm so drained - how will I ever cope with this?" You do have tremendous adjustments to make. These feelings of insecurity and fear are part of this adjustment.

If you discuss these feelings, you will begin to see ways of coping with your situation. In this fear, you will find strength to continue. The beginning steps may be small ones, finding the courage to go to the motor vehicle bureau and change the ownership of the car, getting a plumber to fix the leaking tap, but you will find that you do these and achieve what you want.

You may feel very lonely as you deal with all of this. If it is your life's partner who has died, now there is no one with whom to share your thoughts, feelings and accomplishments. If it is your parent who has died, the person who has known you since birth is not there to share memories and experiences with you. This pain is especially difficult to bear. Reach out to those around you who support you in a caring way, those who do not tell you to "get on with

it." Gradually, you will be able to participate in social activities with friends. This may be the time to rekindle old interests or start on something for which you have never had the time. You will find people that do understand, that have had similar losses, people who speak the "language of grief" as you do. Joining a support group for those in similar situations may provide you with a safe place to share your grief.

**Death brings many changes** - families often find themselves "out of kilter." Each family member mourns in their way and at times may be unable to support one another as expected. Each family grieves in their way and over time will find new ways to find comfort. Reminiscing together, looking at the family photos, retelling family stories, telling the next generation about the deceased and taking time to talk together will allow family members to share in the grief and also the healing.

Your faith may be strength to you during this difficult time or you may find yourself questioning many things. This wondering and questioning about the meaning and purpose of life are part of the journey of grief. Meditation, prayer, being part of your faith community, or finding new ways to experience your faith may help you on your journey.

**Grief is hard work** - Some of the hardest work you will ever do. You know in your head that the person has died, but understanding and accepting that in your heart may take weeks and months. You may often shift between the two. Each time you think and speak of this, it will become more real. This is a painful but necessary process. You will feel many emotions and be drained. It is not selfish to care for yourself at this time, finding a safe place to mourn. Avoiding these feelings will only postpone the experience of the pain.

The time will come when you remember with love and affection, and not feel the pain of the loss as much. One day, for a brief moment you will remember them and the hurt will be less. You may laugh with a friend, enjoy the change in the season or a new film and feel good. This does not mean that you have forgotten your loved one. Rather you are moving to a place where you can remember them lovingly. As you make this journey, you will find yourself changing, learning to live without this person. This is one of the hardest parts of grief. You will survive. That does not mean that you do not love the person; rather you will use what they have given you in your new life.

You may discover strengths and abilities that you had not expected. You will develop a new sense of who you are without this person in your life. This does not mean that the person is forgotten - they will always be a part of you. You will remember them in a way that will bring you comfort and peace.

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