

Loss and Grief

The Centre for Women's Health

The Grieving Process

'Experiencing a terrible loss and the grief that goes with it is the most concrete proof there is that you are a normal, real ... human being.' ⁽¹⁾

Grief describes the feelings and reactions we have when we lose someone we care about or something we value.

Grief is a response to **loss** and loss is an inevitable part of human experience. Loss may be experienced for many things, including the loss of hopes and dreams, the loss of opportunities and the loss of 'normality'.

Grief is a natural, normal process that affects everyone in a variety of ways throughout life. We all grieve in our own way.

The Four Steps to Recovery

- Shock and Numbness
- Denial and Withdrawal
- Acknowledgement and Pain
- Adaptation and Renewal ⁽²⁾

Thoughts and Feelings

- **Shock and Denial** – Soon after a loss you may feel numb, panicky and unable to cry. It can be difficult to believe what has happened and may take some time for the reality to sink in. Your thinking may feel confused and concentrating on anything can feel difficult. You may not want to talk to anyone, but don't necessarily want to be alone.
- **Guilt** – This is a common experience. Regret may be felt for something that happened or something that was said or not said. It can be viewed as a time of asking questions and trying to make sense of what has occurred.
- **Yearning** – Feeling desperate for what has been lost to return and preoccupied with thoughts of this.
- **Anger** – This is a frequent and sometimes confusing emotion. It can arise from a sense of frustration and helplessness. Life can feel very unfair. You may feel angry with yourself or other people for;
 - ◆ Causing or not preventing the loss
 - ◆ Not understanding your feelings
 - ◆ Carrying on and enjoying life
 - ◆ Having something you don't have...
 - ◆ If you have been bereaved you may also feel angry with the person who died for abandoning you and leaving you with this pain.
- **Loneliness** – Grieving can feel like a lonely process. It may seem no one understands or cares. Family and friends may be a great support initially but then seem to move-on at a faster pace and assume you will do the same. They may also be dealing with loss and your loss may remind them of their own.
- **Depression** – Some feelings of depression are a natural part of mourning. You may lose interest in life and find it difficult to function for a while. You may feel despair and no point in going on.
- **Relief** – It can be very stressful and tiring to anticipate a loss. When the loss actually occurs you may then experience some relief. This is a common response but can be one that feels difficult to share with others.

Behaviours

There are many behaviours associated with normal grieving such as;

- Sleep disturbance
- Loss of appetite
- Anxiety and panic
- Restlessness
- Exhaustion
- Crying
- Inability to cope
- Loss of interest
- Irritability

Looking After Yourself

Grieving is exhausting. You may feel like you are on a roller-coaster, up one minute and down the next. Here are some things that may help while you are grieving:

Expressing yourself

- Talking can bring relief and help you understand your feelings. It can make the grief more bearable and less overwhelming. Choose someone you can trust to talk to.
- Writing can also be a way of expressing your feelings. This may take the form of a diary, letter or poem.
- Creating an image through paint, clay, dance or song are other ways of releasing your emotions.
- Exercise, such as walking, can allow for the appropriate release of strong feelings such as anger.

Asking for help

There is nothing wrong in asking for emotional or practical support from other people. You may not find this easy but try to be clear about what you need so that others know what they can do to help. Other people may not know how to help you unless you tell them.

Keepsakes

Some people find that their memories give them comfort. Mementos which bring to mind these memories might include photos, an item of clothing, a picture or a piece of music.

Music

Listening to music can help in many ways; to express grief, enhance memories, change your mood and to give comfort.

Remember

- Trust yourself – Follow your feelings – whether this means being on your own or seeking the company of others.
- Don't expect too much of yourself too soon – take each day as it comes – grieving takes time.
- Ensure you eat well – little and often if you can't face a big meal. Bath/shower regularly and get the rest and sleep you need.
- Although strategies such as alcohol or drugs may seem to bring short term relief, your grief is only masked by these and it is important to find other longer term strategies to help you understand and accept your loss.

The Future

As time gradually passes you feel less overwhelmed and may even forget the loss, just for a few minutes, then for longer periods – this is not a betrayal of what was lost, but a natural reaction.

Don't feel surprised if you suddenly find yourself overcome with grief at an unexpected time – this will lessen in time.

You may wish to mark special days such as birthdays and anniversaries in a personal way.

It is not unusual to find yourself reassessing aspects of your life; priorities, values, hopes and friendships.

It is important not to rush the process of healing, and to express your grief at your own pace.

Through the experience of grieving you may find that you have stronger inner resources than you were aware of.

The goal of the grieving process is to take your life forward, whilst learning to live with what has been lost.

References

- (1) + (2) Deits, B. (2004) Life After Loss: A Practical Guide to Renewing Your Life After Experiencing Major Loss, University of Cambridge, Counselling Service.

This leaflet written by Women's Health
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