

Grieving



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The death of someone close to us is one of life's most stressful events. We fear loss of companionship and the changes it will bring to our lives. It takes time to heal and each of us responds differently. We may need help to cope with the changes in our lives. But in the end, coping effectively with bereavement is vital to our mental health.

If someone close to you has just died, we hope this pamphlet will help you understand that you are not alone in your feelings and that help is available. If you have a grieving friend or relative, this pamphlet will help both of you understand and cope with this difficult time.

Understanding grief

Mourning and the complex stages of the grieving process are necessary. Even though the present is felt to be intolerably painful, it is healthy and normal for a bereaved person to experience intense emotions and swift mood changes. These are natural reactions to loss.

It takes time to heal. The period of grieving depends upon the situation and varies greatly from person to person. Grieving is not a weakness; it is a necessity. Refusing to grieve is not courageous and may cause you a great deal of harm later on.

Grieving helps us to come to terms with the need for our relationship with the deceased and to re-focus our energies toward the future.

The stages of grieving

There are many different stages of grieving. The three stages outlined below are ones which most people will experience. However, people do not usually flow from the first stage through to the last in a logical order. Some people will jump back and forth between stages. The length of time it takes to go through the different stages will vary.

Stage I - Numbness or Shock - Immediately after news of death, you will likely experience a period when you feel very little except a sense of unreality. Some people have described this period as being enclosed in a cocoon, or as "sleepwalking", through the funeral and necessary details which follow death. This stage may last for several weeks or several months.

Stage II - Disorganization - Eventually, nature's protective shock begins to wear off, and feelings begin to come alive again. You may have some physical symptoms such as tightness in the throat, shortness of breath, the need to sigh frequently and extreme fatigue. Emotional symptoms can be even more distressing. Anger at the loved one for dying and the accompanying guilt may be overwhelming. You need to review the life of the deceased person and the events leading up to the actual death. You may agonize over things you believe you did wrong or things you think you should have done for the deceased. Most frightening of all can be the feeling of losing emotional control. It is a painful period of emotional upheaval but a normal and necessary part of grieving. Most people will recover but it can take weeks, months or, to some degree, several years.

Stage III - Re-organization - Eventually, there will be periods when you do not dwell on your loss, and you can focus on daily tasks. A great hurt is never completely forgotten; rather, it takes its place among life's other, more immediate demands. Deeper friendships may be formed through the process of sharing. You may have a new awareness of the preciousness of life and of the value of people and experiences.

How to help a friend who is grieving

It is difficult to become part of another person's grieving process unless you are invited to become involved. You should also understand that you too may feel guilty or helpless when faced with the inevitability of death, or feel there is little you can do to comfort the bereaved person. This is a natural feeling. There are, however, definite ways that you can help during the different stages of grieving.

Helping with Stage I - Be a supporter; you are there to be leaned upon. Help with practical things such as providing meals, helping with funeral details and assisting with the many confusing tasks that follow death.

Helping with Stage II - Be a listener; accept your friend's need to vent emotions and to tell repeated stories about the life and death of his/her loved one. People need to talk about their loss.

Helping with Stage III - Be a friend; help people to regain touch with the world around them. Encourage involvement in social activities, special interest groups, hobbies, etc.

Few people can cope alone with the pain of bereavement. They need to talk about their loss and share their pain. This is a normal part of the grieving process. However, if reactions are extreme, encourage professional help and provide the support necessary to assist the bereaved to take this step toward help.

How to cope with your own grief

- Be with caring people. Spend time with family, friends, neighbours, co-workers, and people, such as members of a self-help group, who have been through the experience of loss and grief.
- Take enough time. Everyone reacts differently to a loss. It is hard to estimate a "normal" grieving period; it will probably take longer than you expect.
- Express your feelings. Let yourself feel sadness, anger and other feelings. Find a way to express these feelings through talking, weeping, etc .
- Accept a changed life. Recognize that you may be less attentive to your work and personal relationships for some time. Your routines may need to change - this is a natural outcome of loss and grief.
- Reach out for help. Don't always rely on others to make the first move; they may be concerned about allowing you your privacy. Let people know when you need companionship and support.
- Take care of your physical health. Be aware of any physical signs of stress or illness you may develop. Speak with your doctor if you feel your grief is affecting your health.
- Support others in their grief. Offer support to other family members and friends who are grieving, including the children. Be honest with the children about what has happened and about how you feel. Encourage them to talk about their feelings.
- Come to terms with your loss. Move towards acceptance of the death of your loved one. Work through feelings of bitterness and blame which may get in the way of moving forward in your life.
- Make a new beginning. As the sense of grief becomes less intense, return to interests and activities you may have dropped and think about doing something new. Consider forming new relationships at your own pace.
- Postpone major life changes. Consider waiting a year or so before making big decisions, such as moving, remarrying or having another child. Your judgement may not be the best while you

are mourning, and the changes may add to the stress you are already experiencing.

Do you need more help?

If you are bereaved and feel you need more assistance than friends and family can provide, contact a community organization, such as the Canadian Mental Health Association, which can help you find additional support.