

# Understanding Grief

**Grief is a normal and natural response to the loss of someone or something important to you.** Adjusting to the absence of someone or something we love is painful. This loss can cause us to question many things, experience a spectrum of emotions, and respond in ways we can't foresee. This is because you're human and something awful has happened.

**Grief lasts longer than most of us expect.** Research tells us that it takes anywhere from 18-24 months for a person to adjust to a major loss. This can be longer or shorter depending on the relationship, and whether the death was sudden or traumatic. The most important thing to know is that no specific amount of time is correct or better than another.

**There is no right or wrong way to grieve.** Each of us has our own style of grieving that can be informed by our family of origin, culture, religion, and previous experiences of loss. Sometimes it is more private, reserved for a special time and place. Other times it is more expressive, crying and hugging with friends and family. Listen to what you need and how you feel most comfortable grieving.

**Formal support from counseling or support groups may be needed in order to help us through our grief.** The most helpful thing for grieving people is to be able to talk about the loss. The process of grieving is helped as we connect the thoughts in our mind with the feelings in our heart. Friends and family may be able to assist; the key is to find someone who will listen without judgment. If you need more support, reach out for help.

**Grieving well doesn't mean forgetting.** It doesn't mean "moving on" and "getting over it." Death causes a change in relationships; it doesn't end them. Grieving well means finding ways to remember the person we lost and move forward in life with their memory.

# Responding to Loss

Our response to loss is not just emotional; it can also be physical, psychological, and spiritual. Any of these responses are considered normal and natural.

## Emotional Responses

- Shock
- Denial
- Disbelief
- Guilt
- Fear
- Loneliness
- Emptiness
- Sadness
- Disorganization
- Panic
- Relief
- Powerlessness
- Anger
- Hopelessness
- Shame

## Psychological Responses

- Inability to concentrate
- Explosive emotions
- Low self-esteem
- Lack of interest
- Prolonged withdrawal
- Inability to experience pleasure

## Physical Responses

- Tiredness / Lack of energy
- Difficulty sleeping / Oversleeping
- Lack of appetite / Overeating
- Tightness in chest
- Shortness of breath
- Headaches
- Ulcers
- Hearts problems
- Stomach pain
- Nervousness / Trembling
- Lump in the throat
- Muscle loss
- Anger with higher power
- Doubts about belief system
- Questions about meaning of life
- Interest in afterlife
- Changed priorities
- Search for meaning in the loss
- Gratitude for time spent together
- Belief that person is free from suffering / in a better place / reunited with loved ones

If feelings of sadness and hopelessness develop into depression, contact your medical provider. If you have thoughts of harming yourself or others, please call Crisis Services at (716) 834-3131.

## 5 Steps to Manage Intense Feelings

1. **Recognize** your feelings. They are a normal reaction to grief. You do not need to be afraid of them; they will come and they will go.
2. **Name** your feelings. When you are able to name something that's hurting you, it loses its power to cause you fear and harm.
3. **Accept** your feelings. There are no “good” or “bad,” no “right” or “wrong” feelings. It can be tempting to deny or ignore painful feelings, to put it off for another day. But this only delays your grieving and extends the amount of time you're on this rollercoaster.
4. **Experience** your feelings. Pay attention to what each emotion feels like in your body. Then, give yourself permission to confront them so you can move forward.
5. **Express** your feelings. Find constructive ways of working through tough emotions. You may find a different way of expressing each feeling you recognize. Taking action has a cleansing effect and the intensity of your feelings will diminish.

*One of the most important ways you can help yourself is by taking care of yourself. Through good self-care, we are more likely to be able to slow down and recognize our emotions and respond to them in a way that is not hurtful to ourselves, or the ones we love. Write down things you enjoy doing and can do to take care of yourself. Hang this on your refrigerator or bathroom mirror as an everyday reminder.*

# Self-Care During Grief

After a significant loss, grief is a natural response with a spectrum of emotions. It is a time we need the help of relatives and friends, and may need the help of professional counseling. It is also important for us to take steps in caring for ourselves. Remember that grief takes a lot of energy. Treat yourself with the same care and affection you would offer to a good friend in the same situation. Not all suggestions will be helpful to everyone; your grief is unique to you. Choose the ideas that resonate with you and your experience.

## Be patient with yourself.

- Take time for yourself. Your body, mind, and heart need energy to mend.
- Carefully consider taking on new responsibilities right away. Avoid overextending yourself and making major decisions during this time.
- Appreciate your own strength and avoid comparing yourself to others and their grief.
- Throw away notions of a fixed period of mourning; one year and then you're "over it." This is a myth; grief takes time, whatever time it takes.

## Ask for and accept help.

- Don't be afraid to ask for help from those close to you. So much hurt and pain go ignored during grief because we don't want to bother others. Ask yourself: Wouldn't you want someone close to you to ask for help if they needed it?
- It is very important to find someone who cares and understands, with whom you may talk freely. Seek out that true friend, another bereaved person, or a support group member.
- Accept help and support when offered. It's okay to need comforting. Often people wait to be told when you're ready to talk or if you need anything. Tell them.
- If you are having thoughts about hurting yourself or ending your life, call Crisis Services at (716) 834-3131.
- Join a support group. They offer understanding, guidance, friendship, and hope.
- Give yourself some time to sort out your thoughts, but don't build a wall around yourself in fear of being hurt again. It is important to love and enjoy the people in your life instead of distancing yourself from them, and thus, them from you.
- If grief is intense and prolonged, it may challenge your physical and mental well-being. A counselor may be able to help you through these difficult periods.  
*Call the Wilson Support Center to inquire about counseling options.*

### **Accept your feelings.**

- Feel what you feel. You don't choose your emotions, they choose you.
- It's okay to cry. Crying can help to release various emotions you've held in while out in public, around family members, and at work. Let it out; you will feel better and stronger.
- It's okay to be angry. You may be angry with yourself, God, the person who died, others, or just plain angry. Don't push it down. Let it out; hit a pillow, scream, chop wood, exercise, etc.
- Many people think they are going crazy; this is a normal reaction. You are not losing your mind; you're reacting to death.
- Depression is common to those grieving. Be careful not to totally withdraw yourself from others. If your depression becomes severe or you're considering suicide, get professional help immediately.
- Emotions can be raw. It is important to let these feelings out. If you don't, they are sure to come out some other time, some other way. You won't suffer nearly as much from getting too upset as you will from denying your emotions by keeping them held inside.
- You may have physical problems appear or worsen as a result of your grief. These physical problems are real; make sure to keep up with your medical visits and take steps to care for your health.

### **Lean into the pain.**

- You can't outrun pain. You can't go around it, over it, or under it; you must go through it in order to survive it. Be careful not to get stuck, asking for help when you need it.
- Save time to grieve. Don't throw yourself into your work or other activities that leave you no time for grieving.
- In a time of severe grief, try to limit your use of alcohol. It is a depressant and generally leaves you feeling worse. Similarly, some medications (prescriptions and over the counter) may contribute to the depressive symptoms of grief. Talk with your doctor or pharmacist about all medications during this time. There are medications available that can ease the more acute symptoms of grief. These should only be considered when grief responses are prolonged or severe.
- Seek the help of a counselor or clergy if grief is unresolved.

### **Be good to yourself.**

- Keep a journal. It is a good way to understand what you are feeling and thinking. Hopefully, when you reread it later on you will see that you are getting better.
- Try to get adequate rest. Go to bed earlier and avoid caffeine.
- Good nutrition is important; the things we put into our bodies effect our brains and its ability to cope.

- If there are particular days of the week/month/year that are especially difficult, schedule activities that you find particularly comforting into those time periods.
- Read recommended books on grief. Learning about others' experiences of grief can help you to understand what you are going through and how you may be able to cope better.
- Moderate exercise helps to work off frustration and can help sleep quality improve.
- Begin to build pleasant memories with family and friends. Don't feel guilty about enjoying yourself. It is possible to feel sad and happy and angry all at the same time.
- Adjust your routine to focus on the things you need. Avoid making huge changes, but look for ways to individualize your daily life.
- Plan things to which you can look forward – a trip, visiting a loved one, lunch with a friend, an upcoming event. Start today to build memories for tomorrow.
- Find quotes or posters that are helpful to you and hang them where you can see them regularly.
- Treat yourself to small indulgences: hot baths, take out, movies, a good book, etc.
- Work toward balance in your life: rest, work, read, relax.
- Maintain or develop a spiritual focus in your life, if that has been helpful to you in the past or something new that could bring about positive change.
- When you feel ready, aim at regaining a healthy, balanced life by broadening your interests. Take time for activities that can bring some purpose into your life. Think about doing something you've always wanted to do: taking a class, community projects, hobby clubs. Or rediscover old interests and activities you may had to sacrifice previously.
- Remember: take your life one moment, one hour, one day at a time.

### **Grief takes time.**

- Grief can come and go over time. Be gentle with the expectations you have for yourself.
- You will get better. Hold onto hope. Some days you may feel like you're just existing, but, gradually, better days will return with a renewed sense of purpose.

*If you have questions or concerns about the grieving process,  
please give us a call at (716) 836-6460 or email [griefsupport@palliativecare.org](mailto:griefsupport@palliativecare.org)  
for more information, resource and support.*