

Living With Loss and Grief

From the time we leave our mother's womb, we begin a lifetime of losses. They come in many forms. The loss of childhood innocence, loss of youth, loss of safety, loss of a pet, loss of relationships, loss of location (moving), loss of seasons, loss of jobs, just to name a few.

Grief is a natural and normal reaction to the loss of anyone or anything important. The intensity of the grief is directly related to the emotional attachment to the person or thing that is lost. The stronger the connection to the love object, the greater the pain. Grief is the price we pay for love.

Though the process includes similar phases for everyone, the way grief is experienced can look and feel different depending on the individual. A person's belief system, previous experiences with loss, culture and/or religion can all make a difference in the way one moves through the grief process. Since people can grieve in different ways, it is important to not compare your experience of grief with someone else's.

Experiencing the death of a loved one can be the most stressful and emotionally traumatic event we are likely to face. It is a physical, emotional, spiritual and psychological response that can be all consuming and take every ounce of energy leaving one feeling exhausted. Though it can be experienced so differently, below are some common grief reactions:

- Finding it difficult to concentrate and remember
- No longer enjoying what used to bring you pleasure
- Feeling empty and alone even when you are with others
- Crying at unexpected times
- Feeling like you are on an emotional roller coaster
- Physical discomfort such as headaches and stomach upset

Shock and/or numbness are usually an initial response to loss. Shock is a physiological reaction which protects from further pain, a protective fog blankets and cushions the reality of death. One is on auto pilot with responses becoming mechanical. Shock helps get through the necessary details of death.

An anticipated loss allows time to get acquainted with the idea of losing someone or something. When experiencing a sudden or unexpected loss, the shock is intensified. Whether anticipated or sudden there is usually a component of shock and/or numbness.

When the shock or numbness wears off, reality of the loss crashes in. The collision with the reality of death hurts deeply. Unlike the localized pain of a physical injury, this is totally engulfing. Every part hurts. It hurts just to be. This intense pain can manifest in physical symptoms such as sleep irregularities, changes in appetite, gastro-intestinal disturbances, restlessness and muscle tension, just to name a few.

Anger and guilt are common emotions felt after a loss. You may feel angry at your God, at your self, at anyone who is not dealing with a death/loss. It can manifest in many different ways. A sense of helplessness can intensify the anger, with guilt often following.

Feelings of depression and emptiness may temporarily overcome you. General mood disturbances might also occur. You may feel that your life has lost all meaning and wonder if grief will ever end. Because grief includes so many intense emotions, sometimes conflicting feelings at the same time, grieving people can feel like they are going crazy. "How can I feel so intensely sad and relieved at the same time?" one may ask.

A current loss can trigger feelings and thoughts from prior losses, which can intensify the experience even more, especially if the past has not been processed. Even when past losses have been attended to, a current loss can take you back to those old memories and feelings.

HOW TO HEAL?

The best piece of advice I can give is to allow your emotions to be what they are. Feelings are very transient, if you relax into them. It is challenging to relax into something that is painful...and that is exactly what needs to happen. When you embrace your feelings, you move through them. "What we resist persists."

By repressing or denying your feelings, the agony and pain are prolonged. By allowing the emotions to be felt, you allow yourself to move forward in the grieving process.

Grief comes in waves, sometimes small ones and sometimes tsunamis. The trick is to ride the waves as they come...one after the other. I often hear people say, "I don't know what happened, I was having a good day and all of a sudden I am in the middle of a grief attack." Grief attacks happen and you sometimes do not know what triggers them. It can be a thought, a smell, a sight, a touch, a sound or an emotion.

Emotional support while grieving is important. Sometimes the ones you expect it from the most are the least able to provide it. Maybe they are grieving also. Maybe they are having a very different experience of grief. Many times people do not know how to be supportive and will say hurtful things when they are attempting to be helpful. Saying things such as "at least she is not suffering anymore" or "he is in a better place" are usually not helpful to someone who is grieving.

Even if the deceased person is no longer suffering and is in a better place, this is a "logical" response to an emotional need. The emotional need to be heard is better met with an emotional response. It can be as simple as actively listening. One way to let a person know you are listening is to paraphrase what they have said to you. Sometimes silence is the most helpful emotional response. The best way to support a person who is grieving is to listen without judgment and provide a space where they can say what they need to say and be who they need to be.

HELPFUL HINTS:

Acknowledge the loss.

Accept the pain of grief. Try to live through it, not avoid it.

Be gentle and patient with yourself. Grief is a process; it will take as long as it takes. Be compassionate with you.

You do not have to grieve alone. Check out grief support groups or individual counseling.

Share your thoughts and feelings. Find enough compassionate listeners. You probably will need to talk more than one person can listen.

Understand each person has an individual time table for grief. Each person grieves separately and differently. We each move through grief at our own pace.

Find your sense of humor. Try to hang on to it.

Get some physical exercise. Any is better than none.

Learn to hug again.

Don't try to hide your grief from children in the home, be open and honest with them because they too are grieving. Learn about the different ways children grieve and address them with age appropriate sensitivity.

Crying is healthy and biologically necessary.

Accept yourself. Begin to understand you are someone new and life will never be the same as before. Acknowledge that change.

When you exhaust your own resources it is a good time to reach out for help. It is a sign of strength, not weakness, to acquire new tools for life's tool box.

GRIEF RECOVERY PROCESS:

Though there is no set time table for recovering from grief, Psychologist J. William Worden has identified the grieving process as having four tasks:

- Accepting the reality of the loss.
- Working through the pain of grief.
- Adjusting to an environment where the loved one is missing.

- Remembering the loved one with less pain and investing emotional energy in other relationships.

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