

Grief and Loss

There are many changes that occur in our lives that can trigger feelings of grief and loss. Most people go through more than one of these experiences in their lives. Learning to deal with it is often difficult because no one likes to experience negative emotions.

What is Grief?

Grief can be defined as intense emotion felt when someone experiences a loss that is significant. It is the process of working through the pain of loss, a functional necessity, not a weakness. There is no one "way" to grieve, the process described here is not all inclusive of the vast range of experiences after a loss. Nor does one have to go through every stage presented in this pamphlet.

Losses that Can Cause Grief

Typically people view significant loss as a death in the family or of a close friend, but there are many life changes and transitions, which produce feelings of loss and grief.

Relationship Changes <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Divorce or separation (loss for any family member)• Marriage or commitment to someone• Birth of a child or child leaving home• Friendship changes Life Changes <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Death of a spouse, family member, or friend• Pregnancy or loss of a pregnancy Health Changes <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Personal injury or illness• Changes in family members' health	Job/School-related Change <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gain or loss of a promotion or career opportunity• New work conditions, hours, or responsibility• Graduation• Moving• Retirement Other Changes <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Loss of income or financial readjustment• Changes in habits (such as quitting smoking)
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People can also experience grief when they have gone through a series of losses. If you don't have enough time between losses it is more difficult to heal and the impact of even small losses is often great.

Stages of Grief

Different stages in grief have been identified but don't necessarily have to occur in any special order. Grief is a necessary process to heal after a loss and any variety of emotions are a "normal" part of that experience.

When a loss occurs it is important to recognize the loss. Often people will ignore the loss, act as if nothing happened. Sometimes this is referred to as "denial." Although it is normal, unfortunately denial doesn't make the reality of healing. Sometimes what looks like denial is really shock, disbelief that the loss has occurred even if the loss was anticipated. Someone may operate in "auto pilot" for a while before the full impact of the loss is felt.



What seems to be opposite reaction is emotional release, which is a huge display of emotion. Memories of the lost person or object can produce feelings that are overwhelming and sometimes lead to depression. A person can also experience a stage of anxiety in which they may have disturbing dreams and many unanswered questions such as, "Why me (her/him)?" and "What if...?". Physical symptoms including headaches, fatigue, insomnia or stomach upset can develop as a result of the depressing and anxiety or even mimicking the manner of loss.

Anger toward the lost person or object and hostility toward others is quite common in the grief process. People often also feel guilt about their negative feelings and/or things they "should" have said or done. A variety of fears can arise until the healing of memories can begin. Letting go of the pain, not the person is important in the stage. Finally, a process of acceptance is necessary for the wound to heal.

Healing takes time and although many people think that grief should be over by a year or so this is rarely the case. Healing does not mean that you will never experience sadness about the loss again, it means you have let go of the pain that makes it difficult to continue your life.

Ways of Dealing With Grief

- As you move through the stages of grief there are things you can do to help ease the process.
- Understand that grief comes in waves, try not to resist these waves but allow yourself to flow through them. Be patient with yourself!
- Get support from friends and relatives. If someone offers help, let them; it may be the way they show their friendship.
- Ask for what you need. Having someone listen to your thoughts and feelings about the loss is very healing.
- Experience your feeling. Expressions of grief aren't "breaking down," they're "breaking through."
- Take care of yourself. Grief can be fatiguing, pay attention to your physical needs. Both rest and exercise are important.
- Get involved in your life to the degree that you can. Some are able to sooner than others, that's okay, go at your own pace.
- Put off unnecessary decisions and set small goals that are achievable.

Know when to get professional help. If you find you're abusing alcohol or other drugs to numb the pain or you feel you're stuck somewhere in the grief process there are community resources available.

Loss in our lives is inevitable, but with time, patience and support, we can emerge from the grieving process with a new understanding of ourselves and the people in our lives.