Coping with Death, Loss, & Grief

The death of someone we care about is distressing, and the sense of loss and grief which follows is a natural and important part of life. It is not a sign of weakness, but rather a healthy and fitting response - a tribute to someone we loved and lost to death.

Normal Grief Reactions

When experiencing grief, it is common to:

- Feel like you are "going crazy"
- Have difficulty concentrating
- Feel sad or depressed
- Be irritable or angry (at the deceased, oneself, others, higher powers)
- Feel frustrated or misunderstood
- Experience anxiety, nervousness, or fearfulness
- Have an upset stomach
- Feel like you want to "escape"
- Experience guilt or remorse
- Be ambivalent
- Feel numb or empty
- Lack energy and motivation
- Have difficulty sleeping or have nightmares
- Feel helpless or hopeless
- Feel a sense of disbelief

Whatever feelings and reactions you have are ok. Criticizing yourself for your feelings or thinking that you should "just pull yourself together" is usually not helpful. Grief is as individual as a fingerprint; however, the need to grieve is universal.

Grief as a Process

Seldom does a person go into one side of grief and come out the other side the same as before the loss. Think of going through your grief, rather than getting over the loss. The length of the grief process is different for everyone. It is important to note that the grief process is not linear, but is more often experienced in cycles. Grief is sometimes compared to climbing a spiral staircase where things can look and feel like you are just going in circles, yet you are actually making progress. Being patient with the process and allowing yourself to have any feelings about the loss can help.

With time and support, things generally do get better. However, it is normal for significant dates, holidays, or other reminders to trigger feelings related to the loss. Taking care of yourself, seeking support, and acknowledging your feelings during these times are ways that can help you cope. By seeing the process through, you can develop personal strengths to cope with other types of loss and difficulties that may come up later in life. Acceptance of the loss means gaining a perspective - a new sense of self and what you can do with your life. If you feel stuck in your grief, talking to a counselor or a supportive person may help you move forward in the healing process.
Culture, Rituals, and Ceremonies

Your cultural background can affect how you understand and approach the grief process. Some cultures anticipate a time to grieve and have developed rituals to help people through the grief process. Grief rituals and ceremonies acknowledge the pain of loss while also offering social support and a reaffirmation of life. Some people find solace in creating their own unconventional ceremonies, such as a ritual with personal friends in a private setting.

Coping With Grief

Running away from grief postpones sorrow; clinging to grief prolongs pain. Neither leads to healing. Each one of us has our own way of coping with painful experiences. The list below may help you generate ideas about how to manage your feelings of grief.

- Talk to supportive family or friends frequently about your feelings and memories
- Keep the routines of life going (e.g., classes, work, interests, and friends)
- Exercise
- Eat healthy, good foods
- Get plenty of rest
- Express yourself creatively through art or writing
- Seek spiritual support
- Take time to relax
- Join a support group
- Spend time with others doing enjoyable things
- Listen to music
- Be patient with yourself
- Allow emotions, and allow a break from emotions
- Seek counseling
- Don’t make any big or sudden decisions about life
- Avoid extra responsibilities during this healing time
- Give yourself permission to grieve; don’t try and rush things along

You may want to experiment with these ideas or create a list of your own. Healthy coping skills are important in dealing with a loss and helping you move forward in the healing process. Try to resist the temptation to “throw yourself” into work, school or other diversions. This leaves too little time for the grief work you need to do. Be patient with yourself. It takes time to heal. Some days will be better than others.

Supporting Others Who Are Grieving

As the shock of the loss fades, there is a tendency on the part of the griever to feel more pain and sadness. Well-meaning friends may avoid discussing the subject due to their own discomfort with grief or their fear of making the person feel bad. As a result, people who are grieving often feel more isolated or lonely in their grief. People who are grieving are likely to fluctuate between wanting some time to themselves and wanting closeness with others. They may want someone to talk to about their feelings. Below are some ways that you can help a friend experiencing loss:
- Be a good listener
- Ask about their feelings
- Just sit with them
- Share your feelings
- Ask about their loss
- Remember the loss
- Acknowledge the pain
- Let them feel sad
- Be available when you can
- Do not minimize grief

**To One In Sorrow**

Let me come in where you are weeping, friend,
And let me take your hand.

I, who have known a sorrow such as yours,
can understand.

Let me come in -- I would be very still
Beside you in your grief;
I would not bid you cease your weeping, friend,
Tears can bring relief.

Let me come in -- I would only breathe a prayer,
And hold your hand,
For I have known a sorrow such as yours,
And understand.

-Grace Noll Crowell

**Resources**

*Tear Soup* by Pat Schwiebert & Chuck DeKlyen (2005)
*A Time to Grieve: Meditations for Healing After the Death of a Loved One* by Carol Staudacher (1994).
*We get it: Voices of Grieving College Students & Young Adults* by Heather Servaty-Seib & David Fajgenbaum (2015).
*When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Harold Kushner (1981).

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