

The Many Faces of Grief: Coping with Loss

Grief is a natural process, an intense fundamental emotion and a universal experience that makes us human. It is a process that entails extremely hard work over a period of many painful months or years. People grieve because they are deprived of a loved one; the sense of loss is profound. The loss of a spouse, child or parent affects our very identities – the way we define ourselves as a husband, wife, parent or offspring. Moreover, grief can arise from the survivor's sudden change in circumstances after a death and the fear of not knowing what lies ahead. The death of someone close can be a life-changing experience. If you are the primary carer of someone you love, this experience can affect every aspect of your life for some time. It is natural to grieve the death of a loved one before, during and after the actual time of their passing. The process of accepting the unacceptable is what grieving is all about.

Experiencing grief after a loss is normal – no matter what the loss. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, as every person's journey through grief is unique.

- **Bereavement** is what happens to you.
- **Grief** is what you feel.
- **Mourning** is what you do.

Anticipatory grief may occur when a death is expected. It may help the family, but not the dying person.

Normal grief begins soon after a loss, and symptoms go away over time. Many bereaved people will have grief bursts or pangs. Grief is a process.

Complicated grief is when feelings of loss are debilitating and don't improve after time passes. In complicated grief, painful emotions are so long lasting and severe that individuals have trouble recovering from the loss and resuming their own life.

Individual responses to grief may include the following:

- Immediate responses following the death may be shock, numbness and a sense of disbelief.
- From the outside, one may appear to be holding up well. This happens when the reality of the death has not yet penetrated one's awareness, giving the appearance that one has accepted the loss.
- In the months after, however, this numbness may turn to intense feelings of separation, pain and yearning.
- When the realisation that the loved one will not return hits, despair may set in.
- Self-blame compensates for feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. 'It's my fault' gives an illusion of power.

How to cope with loss and grief:

- Recognise what is happening. Recognise that your inner world is a 'construction zone'.
- Expect highs and lows.
- Turn to friends and family members.
- Share with others what helps and what does not.
- Join a support group.
- Talk to a therapist or grief counsellor.

How to take care of yourself as you grieve:

- Face your feelings. You can try to suppress your grief, but you cannot avoid it forever.
- Write your feelings in a grief journal. Writing about feelings offers relief from sadness and depression
- Express your feelings in a tangible or creative way. Try to maintain your hobbies and interests.
- Plan for grief 'triggers'.
- Look after your physical health.
- Maintain a normal routine as much as possible.
- Make a 'to-do' list of no more than five tasks. Keep goals small and manageable.
- Take time for recreation without guilt.

Things to do as you grieve:

- Take a walk.
- Name three things you are able to do.
- Engage in the bigger world for 30 minutes.
- Send love to the person who died.
- Distract yourself.
- Practise mindfulness.
- Talk about your loss.
- Recognise something in your life that continues.
- Do something nice for yourself.
- Write down three things you wanted to do.
- Do something for someone else.

How to support a bereaved person:

- Make a phone call to tell them you are thinking of them.
- Allow them to talk about their fears and their loved one.
- Have empathy for the person's loss. Do not lessen the loss by saying, 'She would have wanted it this way', or 'He is in a better place now'. Instead, say, 'I am sorry you feel sad. I am here to support you'.
- Understand their grief from their perspective and normalise their experience
- Avoid clichés; listen if you do not know what to say.
- Stay in contact with them on a regular basis. Text or email inspirational words.
- Encourage them to seek help.

'Healing doesn't mean the damage never existed. It means the damage no longer controls your life'.

- Shah Rukh Khan

'Rather than mourn the absence of the flame, let us celebrate how brightly it burned'.

- Anonymous