

Grief & Bereavement

Facts

Grief is a natural part of life and a perfectly normal response to the death of a loved one. It is an adjustment process which allows you to gradually accept your loss. People express grief in their own ways and at their own pace. Normal grief is healthy and should lead to recovery as well as to growth and healthy change.

Experts suggest it generally takes 18-24 months to stabilize after the death of a family member, and much longer if the death was a violent one. For many, the worst period can come 4-7 months after the event, a time when most people often expect you to be “over” your loss. Understanding the grieving process enables people to gain control over their grief, rather than being controlled, or even destroyed, by it.

Stages of Grieving

The stages of grieving are most often described as a cycle which involves feelings and behaviors. These phases are not separate, and do not occur in a strict order; they tend to overlap and proceed in a jagged pattern - one step forward, two steps backward. No two people react alike and the same person will not react in the same way to every loss.

In general, these stages include:

- 1) **Shock and Numbness** (high level during first 2 weeks) - Feelings may include disbelief, denial, anger, or guilt. Behaviors may include crying, searching, sighing, loss of appetite, sleep disturbance, muscle weakness, limited concentration, inability to make decisions, or emotional outbursts.
- 2) **Searching & Yearning** (high level from 2 weeks to 4 months) - Feelings may include despair, apathy, depression, anger, guilt, hopelessness, or self-doubt. Behaviors may include restlessness, impatience, poor memory and lack of concentration, social isolation, crying, anger, loss of energy, or testing what is real.
- 3) **Disorientation** (peaks at 4-7 months) - Feelings may include depression, guilt, disorganization, or feeling that grieving is a disease.
- 4) **Reorganization** (takes 18-24 months to stabilize after major change) - Feelings may include a sense

of release, a freedom from the obsession with loss, renewed hope and optimism. Behaviors may include renewed energy, stable sleeping and eating habits, relief from physical symptoms, better judgment, increased interest in goals for the future.

Helping Yourself

Grief can take its toll on your health, causing anxiety, weight changes, or a weakened ability to fight off disease and extreme tiredness. It is important to maintain a healthy diet, be physically active, and get proper rest, even though you may not feel like eating or getting out of bed. If you are concerned about weight changes, the amount of rest you are getting, or other physical problems, see your health care provider.

Deep sadness is a natural part of grief; however, for some people, it can trigger a lasting depression. Warning signs include lack of energy, thoughts of suicide, and withdrawal from friends and family. If your symptoms are severe or have continued for a long time, seek professional help to determine if your feelings are related to the normal grief process or to clinical depression, a medical condition.

Avoid using drugs and alcohol. Medication should be taken sparingly and only under the supervision of a physician. Many substances are addictive and can lead to a chemical dependency; in addition, they may stop or delay the necessary grieving process.

Friends and family may be uncomfortable around you, wanting to ease your pain, but not knowing how. Take the initiative and help them learn how to be supportive to you.

Other coping suggestions include:

- Giving yourself permission and time to grieve.
- Focusing on your strengths and coping skills.
- Asking for support and help from your family, friends, church or other community resource; joining or developing a support group.
- Redefining your priorities and focusing your energy and resources on those priorities.
- Setting small realistic goals to help tackle obstacles. It may be helpful to reestablish daily

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routines for yourself and your family.

- Acknowledging unresolved issues and using the hurt and pain as a motivator to make the necessary changes to heal.
- Remembering that you are not alone.

Helping Someone Else

Many people hesitate to reach out to grieving people because they are afraid of saying the wrong thing or adding to their pain. But the most important thing a person can do to help another who is grieving is to reach out and be available to listen, to help with children, or whatever else seems needed at the time.

Let your genuine concern and care show. Do say you are sorry about what happened and about their pain. Allow the person to express as much grief as they are feeling, and willing to share, at the moment.

Here are some practical things you can do to help a grieving adult: Prepare or provide dinner on an agreed day, and continue doing it every week for 2-3 months. Make a weekly run to the grocery store, laundry, or cleaners. Offer to drive or accompany the person to the cemetery. Offer to help with yard chores, such as watering or mowing. Write notes offering encouragement and support. Offer to house sit so he or she can get away or visit family out of town. Feed and exercise the pets, if needed. Anticipate difficult times, such as birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, and the day of death. Always mention the deceased by name and encourage remembering good times.

Suggestions for helping a bereaved teenager:

- Ask to see a photo of the deceased person and ask them to tell you about the person and why he/she was special.
- Let them relate the circumstances around the death: where they were when the death occurred, what happened afterwards, and what they are experiencing right now.
- Let the teen tell you about any dreams he/she has had about the death of the loved one.
- Suggest that they write a letter to the deceased. While this can be a painful exercise, it can provide an opportunity for the teen to say good-bye, and can provide relief and a safe expression of feelings. It can also be helpful to write a letter to someone they love who is still alive. Many times teens will distance themselves from people, fearing that they could lose someone else. Writing a letter can help

them to reconnect with the important people in their lives.

- Help the teenager determine what they need during this time and encourage them to let others know what this is. The common complaint of many people who are grieving is that people don't seem to care and are not around when you need them. Frequently others do not know what to say or do and hesitate to initiate contact for fear of creating more pain. If we don't tell people what we need, we remain a victim and victims have difficulty healing.

Suggestions for helping a grieving child:

Children should not be shielded from death. You can help the child accept reality by being truthful. Don't make up stories thinking you are protecting the child. Children are often troubled by fears following a loved one's death. The most important thing is to talk to them honestly and with compassion. Let them see that expressions of grief are natural. Allow them to attend funerals if they want to go.

A few of the normal symptoms often seen in grieving children include:

- Bodily distress and anxiety, with physical and emotional symptoms such as bed wetting, loss of appetite, obsessive eating, exhaustion, sleeplessness, and nightmares.
- Outward expressions of hostility, rage, explosive behavior, anger toward the deceased - feelings of being deserted, abandoned, or rejected.
- Guilt/Self-Blame - over comments they may have made such as "I hate you," or, "I wish you were dead."
- Blaming others - such as mother or father, doctors, or God.
- Taking on characteristics and/or mannerisms of the deceased loved one, or carrying out plans or wishes of the deceased.

Sources:

Dr. Glen Davidson; Death & Dying, Kelasan, Inc.; and Against Drunk Driving, Ontario; Teenage Grief, Inc.

For more information contact

Northern Lakes Community Mental Health Authority
231-922-4850

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline
1-800-662-4357

National Alliance on Mental Illness
www.nami.org (800) 950-6264, text "NAMI" to 62640