

Coping with Loss and Grief

Overview

Ways to cope with feelings of grief after losing someone you love.

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When you lose someone you love, you may feel that your pain will never end. How can you cope with deep feelings of loss and grief? How can you plan for the future when each day seems so different without the person you loved?

Feelings like these are natural because grief is a reminder of how precious life is and how much we valued the life of the person we lost. By giving yourself permission to grieve in your own way, you allow the healing process to begin.

Knowing what to expect

The grief process can't be rushed and shouldn't be. It's important to let yourself feel the pain when you lose someone you love. Most people find that over time the intensity of the pain lessens.

No two people grieve in exactly the same way, but many adults have similar emotions before or after a loss. The psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross found that seriously ill people go through five stages of loss as death approaches. You may go through similar stages of grieving for the person you love.

- *Shock and denial.* When you learn that you have lost, or may lose, someone you love, you may find the news hard to accept. You may think, "There must be some kind of mistake," or "This can't be happening to us." Thoughts like these usually pass after you have lived with the reality for a while. In the meantime, the feeling of disbelief gives you emotional breathing room and protects you from the full effect of the news before you are prepared to accept it.
- *Anger.* After you have begun to accept a loss, you may feel very angry. You may blame others or the person who died for the situation even if you know, realistically, that they are not responsible for it. Or, you may let out your frustration by becoming irritated easily or unintentionally doing things that hurt others. All of these feelings are normal. Anger can be a way of hiding your pain when you can't or don't know how to express your real feelings.
- *Bargaining and guilt.* Even if you know there is little or no hope for a recovery, you may tell yourself you can do something to solve the problem. You may try to make a deal with the doctors, God, or yourself, promising to make changes if the situation will go away. You may have thoughts like, "I'll never become angry with my partner or child again if only the cancer goes away." It's normal to go over past actions and think, "If only I had done this . . ." Many people also feel a sense

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of guilt or responsibility that fosters the belief that they can still or should have somehow changed things.

- *Depression.* At some point, you will feel the full impact of the loss, and begin to understand what it will mean to go through life without someone you love. At this stage, you may feel very sad and perhaps allow yourself to cry for the first time. Feelings like these usually mean that you are closer to the end of the grief process.
- *Acceptance.* At the final stage of grief, you accept your loss even though you still don't like this fact. You forgive yourself and others and, perhaps for the first time, may feel a sense of peace about the loss. You may still feel sad, but you have stopped trying to fight reality. You may be able to clean out the room of the person who died or participate again in some of the activities you enjoyed together. At this stage, people often think about trying to find an enduring way to pay tribute to the life of someone who has died.

Not everyone goes through all of the stages of grief, or experiences them in the same order. You may also go through a stage more than once. You may think you have moved beyond depression, but you may feel sad again on a holiday or an anniversary. Or, you may get angry when you have to handle alone the everyday difficulties that you used share. Experiences like these are normal, and you don't have to struggle with them alone. If you feel overwhelmed or very sad for much longer than other people in similar situations -- or if you continue to have trouble eating, sleeping, or enjoying life -- you may want to talk with a therapist, social worker, or clergy member.

Grief counseling or a grief support group can guide you through the process of healing and provide ideas on handling your special challenges. Your employee assistance program (EAP) or employee resource program may be able to give you a referral to a counselor or help you find an appropriate support group. If you have access to a consultant through your EAP or employee resource program, he or she may be able to discuss your particular concerns and help you find the resources you need.

Coping with a loss

Whether sudden or expected, a loss always hurts. If you were very close to someone who died, you may find it almost unbearably painful to remember the happy times you shared. If you weren't as close as you wanted to be, you may regret that you have lost forever the chance to become closer to that person. No matter what kind of relationship you had, you may find the following coping strategies to be helpful:

- *Allow yourself to grieve.* You may feel better temporarily if you distract yourself from grief with hectic activities or don't talk about what happened. But this

approach may not be as helpful over time. If you don't allow yourself to grieve, your pain may stay buried and return at inappropriate times or in more hurtful ways.

- *Express your feelings.* Some people find it helpful to cry, to pray, or to spend a lot of time talking about a loss with friends and relatives. Others may feel so stunned or devastated that at first they can't express their emotions. If you find it hard to talk about your feelings, you might want to keep a journal or spend time with a friend who would be glad just to share a quiet walk together.
- *Take care of yourself.* It's easy to neglect yourself when all your thoughts seem to be about someone else, so make sure you pay attention to your own needs. Try to eat well, even if all you can eat is small portions. Get plenty of rest and regular exercise. This is a good time to treat yourself to an extra bit of pampering.
- *Stay in touch with others.* Spending time alone with your thoughts can be an important part of the healing process, but too much solitude can make you feel isolated and cut off from the support you need while grieving. Reach out to good listeners -- family, friends, clergy, and sympathetic co-workers.
- *Consider joining a support group.* It often helps to talk to people who have had a similar loss. If you don't know people in your situation, ask a doctor, a friend who has had a similar loss, or a counselor how to find a support group that might help. Your employee assistance program (EAP) or the program that provided this publication can also help you find a support group. Or, visit www.USA.gov and search for "grief support." This will give you a list of grief support groups around the country run by reputable organizations such as hospitals or nonprofit groups. The online site GriefNet, www.griefnet.org, has about 50 e-mail grief support groups for adults and others for children. The Compassionate Friends, www.compassionatefriends.org, 877-969-0010, has nationwide meetings and an online support community for people who have lost a child, grandchild, or sibling.
- *Honor your beliefs.* If spiritual beliefs are part of your life, they can be a great comfort after a loss. Religious and cultural customs provide a framework for grieving when you feel numb or unable to make decisions. If death has caused you to question your faith, try not to feel guilty -- this is a normal reaction to grief. Let yourself search for meaning. Even if you haven't been religiously observant for years, a sensitive clergy member won't fault you for seeking help after a loss. You might begin simply by telling a spiritual adviser, "I'm not sure what I believe any more, but I'm feeling sad and confused and wondered if you could help."
- *Treasure your memories.* When you feel ready, take time to recall the things you have shared with the person you lost. Your memories are an undying part of your relationship and can help you honor what you loved about the person. You might

find a special way to preserve the spirit of someone who died -- making a scrapbook, starting a fund, setting up a memorial, or planting a flowering bush.

- *Make major changes slowly.* After a loss, you may feel pressured by well-meaning children or friends to sell a house that's "too big" or quit work and take life easier. It's a good idea to postpone making major changes until you've had time to adjust, financially and emotionally, to life without the person you lost. A familiar house and friendly co-workers can provide a great sense of comfort and stability during a difficult period. Taking life one day at a time can help you make the right decisions when you feel ready to enter a new phase of life.

Living with grief

The grief process doesn't follow a strict timetable or predictable schedule. Some people go through many stages of loss in a few months and others require years.

- *Be patient.* At times, you will feel like you're making progress and then feel like you've taken a few steps backward. This is the normal progression of grief. If you lost a partner or spouse to a sudden accident, you may need more recovery time than someone whose husband had a long-term illness that allowed her to begin to prepare emotionally for the death.
- *Trust your instincts.* You know better than anyone else when it's time to start getting back to some old activities or trying new ones. If a neighbor keeps urging you to take a vacation because that helped her feel better after her spouse died -- and you just don't feel ready for that -- follow your own instincts.
- *Prepare for the holidays and anniversaries.* You may re-experience feelings of intense loss and grief when you face a special occasion you celebrated with the person who died. The first year can be the hardest. Try to anticipate and prepare for these feelings. Make plans to spend the days with people you love and, if you have children, help them find special ways to remember the person you've lost.
- *Remember that your feelings may change.* Just after a loss, you may want to spend time with your family and best friends. Later you may want to talk about the loss with people who can offer a different perspective. Especially if talking with people close to you sometimes makes you feel worse, consider talking to a therapist, a trusted new friend, or a support group. Even years after a death, you may benefit from talking with anyone who can offer support.
- *Learn about the grief process.* Learning about grief can help you deal with unexpected feelings. A good place to begin is the free fact sheet "How to Deal with Grief" from the National Mental Health Information Center. You can download it at <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/ken-01-0104/default.asp>. Or, go to www.U.S.A.gov and search for "How to Deal with Grief."

After a death from AIDS, suicide, or an accident

Certain kinds of losses bring special challenges. These losses may have resulted from diseases or conditions that are often misunderstood, or may have occurred so suddenly you couldn't prepare for them. You may want to make a special effort to find others in a similar situation if someone you love has died of AIDS, suicide, or an accident:

- *AIDS.* If someone close to you has died of AIDS, you may worry that others will make harsh judgments or ask insensitive questions. Some people become hidden mourners, afraid to reveal that they were close to a person who had the disease. Feelings like these are very common, and there are many groups for people who would like to talk about their experience with compassionate listeners. You may be able to find a group by calling a hospice or hospital and speaking to a chaplain or social worker who works with AIDS patients. You can also find groups online.
- *Suicide.* Death can be much harder to accept when someone chooses to end his or her life. If you were close to someone who committed suicide, you may feel all the normal grief reactions but even more intensely. You may try to convince yourself that the death was an accident. You may blame yourself for missing warning signs even if you know that the problem was too complex for you to have solved it. Or, you may find it hard to understand why someone who had so much to live for would take his life. You may also feel confused or unsure of what to think. If this happens, know that you are not alone in feeling the way you do. Consider contacting the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (www.afsp.org) or the American Association of Suicidology (www.suicidology.org) for support groups and other helpful information.
- *An accident.* When death is sudden and accidental, it's hard to let go. Someone you loved has gone so suddenly that you may feel a greater than usual sense of disbelief. You may feel worried that something similar could happen to you or to someone you love. Or, you may become preoccupied with the idea that you could have prevented the death. If others knew the person you lost, you may find it comforting to spend time with them. There are also many helpful groups for people who have lost family members to accidental deaths -- for example, for parents who have lost an infant to sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Trusted listeners such as religious leaders or grief counselors can also provide valuable support.

Looking to the future

For months after a death, you may find that it takes all your strength just to go from one day to the next. But eventually, the grief will ease, and you will begin to find a new energy and sense of direction. After a loss, many people have a stronger desire to help others -- by becoming a mentor, by volunteering, or by supporting a cause. By drawing on your own strengths and the strengths of

others, you will be able to move forward while still honoring the memory of your loved one.

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