

Understanding Grief

These articles will help you understand the grief you may be feeling and how you can cope when someone you care about dies.

1. Grief is normal.

Grief is not a disease. It is the normal, human response to a significant loss. People may encourage you to “be strong” or “not to cry”. But how sad it would be if someone we cared about died and we didn’t cry or we carried on as if nothing had happened. I’d like to think that someone will miss me enough to shed a tear after I’m gone. Wouldn’t you? When you lose someone special from your life you are going to grieve. Our grief is saying that we miss the person and that we’re struggling to adjust to a life without that special relationship. Admittedly, saying that grief is NORMAL does not minimize it’s DIFFICULTY. It may be one of the most challenging experiences of your life. But you are not crazy, or weak, or “not handling things”. You are experiencing grief and after a significant loss that is a normal response.

2. The worst kind of grief is YOURS

A loss is a very personal matter. Your loss seems like the worst possible thing that could have happened to you. Sometimes people ask if it is more difficult to lose a spouse than to lose a child. Others question if it is worse to lose someone after a long lingering illness or if they die suddenly and unexpectedly from a heart attack or in an accident. While these circumstances make each loss different, they are not important to you right now. The worst kind of loss is yours. When you lose a significant person from your life, whatever the relationship, it hurts and nothing takes away from your right to feel the loss and grief the absence of that person from your life.

3. The way out of grief is through it.

Grief is painful. Loss is one of the most difficult human experiences. There is no easy way around it. We may try to avoid the pain. We may attempt to get over it as quickly as possible. But most often it simply does not work that way. Helen Keller said “The only way to get to the other side is to go through the door”. We need to find the courage to go through this experience of grief. Learning this is a major key to recovery.

4. Your grief is intimately connected to the relationship.

Every relationship holds a special and unique significance to us. To fully interpret our grief response we need to understand what the relationship brought to my life and therefore what has been lost from my life. We may grieve the loss of a parent differently from the loss of a friend. Each made a different contribution to our lives. What we have lost is not the same and so we grieve differently. Two individuals, both experiencing the loss of a spouse, may grieve quite differently because of the differing circumstances (the duration, level of happiness etc) of the relationship.

5. Grief is hard work.

A grief response is often referred to as “Grief-work”. It requires more energy to work through than most people expect. It takes a toll on us physically and emotionally. This is why we often feel so fatigued after a loss or why we may feel very apathetic towards people and events. The problem is often compounded by people’s expectations of us to be strong or pull ourselves together or to get on with life.

6. Your grief will take longer than most people think.

How long will grief last? It is finished when it is finished. The first few months may be particularly intense. The first year is difficult: especially the first Christmas or Hanukkah, the first birthday, anniversary, Mother’s Day, Valentine’s Day, “a year ago today day” and many other times that remind us of our loss. All are difficult days and we need to anticipate them, know they are normal and be compassionate with ourselves. Some writers describe the second year of grief as

the lonely year when the realization of the life without the deceased becomes even more of a reality. Take your time. As John Donne says "He who has no time to mourn, has no time to mend." Grief always takes longer than people expect.

7. Grief is unpredictable.

You may experience a wide variety of feelings and reactions, not just those generally associated with grief, like sadness, crying, depression etc. Some of your responses may seem quite uncharacteristic. "This isn't like me", you may think. Grief is unpredictable. We cannot present it in a neat predictable package. Just when you think you have it figured out something comes along to surprise us. In an unexpected moment, suddenly, without warning you find yourself missing the person again. In fact the one predictable thing about grief is that it is unpredictable.

8. There may be "Secondary losses" to deal with.

The death of any individual, difficult as that may be by itself, may also precipitate many other changes in your life. For some it may mean the loss of financial security, a home, or even their independence. For some it may mean the loss of a role: eg the role of being a parent to a child who dies. For others it may be the loss of our hopes and dreams of "living happily ever after" or enjoying retirement together, or having dad walk me down the aisle. There may be many losses - environment, status, alteration of relationships - because of the death. Each one has its own impact and each loss needs to be mourned.

9. Grief comes and goes.

We have said that grief is not a disease. If you have a sore throat, it is painful for a few days, then the pain eases off and gradually disappears. Grief does not work that way, however. Our healing process is different from a sickness model. Sometimes, at first, we do not feel the pain of grief because we are in shock and numb. Often the pain is more intense some months after the event. Even then grief is not unlike a roller coaster. One day we feel pretty good, the next we find ourselves in the depths of despair. Just when we think we are getting over it we may experience another devastating setback. This can be discouraging to those who do not know what is happening. Most have not learned that grief comes and goes and takes much longer than most people expect. We need to realize that this is the way grief works itself out and trust that the process, difficult as it is, is helping us work towards reconciliation.

10. Effective grief work is not done alone.

Society has unrealistic expectations about mourning and often responds inappropriately. Most people do not understand what is normal in grief, expecting us to get over it quickly and expressing these expectations in a way that seems less than sensitive. Many people mistakenly believe that grief is so personal we want to keep it to ourselves. People mean well, but they are not being helpful. Sometimes when people are using cliches or expressing unrealistic expectations we feel like shutting ourselves away. Often they feel uncomfortable with our grief and so, shortly after the funeral is over, the person or the loss is not mentioned. There sometimes seems to be a conspiracy of silence. People are afraid to say or do the wrong thing so they say and do nothing which is possibly the worst thing. Grieving people need to talk. Not everyone will be willing or even able to respond to you. In fairness, not everyone can. Accept that and try to find a support group or a counselor who can help. Or talk to someone who has been through a similar experience. I believe in the power of shared experiences, and often others who have been through the deep places can be a real help. Grief is about coping with the loss of a relationship and often in a helping relationship, relief can be found.