

Death, Loss, and Grief

The death of a loved one is one of the most severe traumas we encounter, 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 one loved and lost to death. Running away from grief postpones sorrow; clinging to grief prolongs pain. Neither leads to healing.

Common Reactions to Loss

No two people react exactly alike to a loss and there are very significant cultural differences. For many, however, the most immediate response to the death of a loved one is shock, numbness, and a sense of disbelief. Physical reactions such as heart palpitations, tightness in the throat, shortness of breath, sweating and dizziness are common. At other times in the grieving process you may experience such physical symptoms as upset stomach, sleep and appetite disturbance or a lack of energy. Also, you may be more susceptible to illness, nightmares and dreams about the deceased person.

Emotional reactions may include a preoccupation with the image of the deceased, feelings of guilt, hostility, fearfulness, apathy, self-doubt, and emptiness. Loss of sexual drive, depressed mood, anger at the deceased for dying, lack of concentration, and extreme sadness may occur.

Bereavement may cause some short- or long-term changes in your family and other relationships and may cause you to be at least temporarily more closed off from others. A tendency toward increased risk-taking behavior is also a possibility.

Factors That May Interfere with Resolving Your Grief

- Avoiding your emotions
- Over-activity to the point of exhaustion
- Using alcohol or other drugs to mask the grief
- Unrealistic promises made to the deceased
- Unresolved grief from a previous loss
- Judgmental relationships
- Acting resentful to those who try to help

Factors That May Help You in Resolving Your Grief

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. 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. You may find the following helpful:

- Give yourself some quiet time alone to think about moving toward a new equilibrium - a transition from who you were before the loss to who you will be after the grieving process.

- Be as open as you can be in expressing your feelings; cry if you need to. Express any anger or sense of unfairness if you feel it.
- Play out in your mind the unfinished business in the relationship and try to come to a resolution; say good-bye.
- Tell someone you trust the story of your loss.
- Try to focus on what you were able to do for the deceased, instead of what you "should have done" or could have done.

Where Can You Turn for Help?

Parents, friends, and family can often be helpful. If you feel comfortable and trusting of someone close, there is a good chance it would help to talk with them. Bereavement Counselors at the local Hospice may also be helpful. Counselors at Guilford's Counseling Center can be important resources.

Being Helpful To Others

Social support for the bereaved is most important. Others can provide a patient presence to allow the bereaved an opportunity to tell the story of the loss and to share how he or she is feeling. Remember that it is up to the individual to get through the grieving process; others can only provide support. If you are concerned for someone who appears to be having a difficult time managing alone, you may want to suggest seeking professional assistance.

If you would like to talk about any of these issues, call the Counseling Center at (336) 316-2163.
