

Death and loss can be a painful experience. However, understanding grief, with proper support, can lead to . . .

Finding HOPE Inside One's Grief

The Grief Process

Grief is emotionally, physically and spiritually painful. At times, the pain can seem unbearable. It is a combination of many emotions that come and go, sometimes without warning. Grieving is the period during which we actively experience these emotions. How long and how difficult the grieving period may take, depends on the relationship with the person who dies, the circumstances of the death and the situation of the survivors. The length of time people grieve can be weeks, months and even years. One thing is certain: grief does not follow a timetable, but it does ease over time.

Since grief is so painful, some people try to "get over" a loss by denying the pain. Studies show that when people do not deal with the emotions of grief, the pain does not go away. It remains with them and can turn up in unrecognizable and sometimes destructive ways. Understanding the emotions of grief and its feelings and symptoms are important steps in healing and in helping others who may be grieving.

Grief is a natural and normal response to any loss that one must go through to continue onward.

It can be the loss of a home, job, marriage, friendship, investment or the death of a loved one, friend or pet. The following information is directed toward the emotions that you or others may experience after a death, whether sudden or anticipated. We hope this guide will help you realize that these feelings are not unusual and that your life will continue onward.

The Feelings and Symptoms of Grief

The process and emotions of grief are described in various ways. The most commonly described reactions are: Shock, Denial, Anger, Guilt, Depression, Acceptance and Growth. It is important to point out that some people experience the grieving process in different degrees and it would be unfair to expect everyone to grieve in the same way. Most often, a person feels several of these emotions at the same time and may revisit certain emotions later on in time.

1. Shock

In the event of a sudden death, such as an accident or murder, the first response people experience is shock. Even if the death is anticipated, there may be disbelief at its finality. A person may feel emotionally numb or may be



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able to go through the motions of life without the normal feeling they once experienced. At the same time, other physical symptoms such as confusion and loss of appetite can be common.

2. Denial

Shock and denial are natural responses that help soften the initial blow of death or loss. Denial may follow soon after the initial shock. For instance, some people may be aware that their loved one has died, but some part of them may have difficulty accepting the reality of the death. It is not uncommon to imagine that the deceased will walk through the door, as if nothing has happened. Some people respond by leaving bedrooms unchanged or make future plans as if the loved one will participate, just as before.

3. Anger

Anger is a normal response and should not be ignored. For instance, sometimes it is directed at the deceased for leaving, causing a sense of abandonment, or perhaps is directed at the doctors and nurses who may be blamed for not doing enough, etc. It is not uncommon for people of faith to feel anger at God for allowing such pain and anguish. Anger may also be directed at oneself for a variety of reasons. It can be a mild feeling or a raging irrational emotion. It can test one's faith or even challenge the goodness of life.

4. Guilt

Few survivors escape feelings of guilt and regret. "I should have done more" are words that can haunt many people. For many, it is not difficult to find reasons for guilt. It is natural to reflect and consider ways that could have been done differently, or should have been done "if only I had known."

5. Sadness/Depression

Deep sadness or depression is the most inevitable emotion of grief. It is normal to feel abandoned, alone and afraid. After the shock and denial have passed, and the anger has been exhausted, sadness or depression, even

hopelessness may set in. A person may have little energy to do even the simplest daily chores. Crying episodes may seem endless.

6. Acceptance

Grief has no reliable time table. Acknowledging the loss of death and experiencing the pain, may free the survivor from a yearning to return to the past. Accepting life without the loved one may give way to a new perspective about the future. Understand that acceptance does not mean forgetting, but rather using the memories to create a new life without the loved one. Hoping for things to be as they were may be replaced by a search for new relationships, new activities and new traditions.

7. Growth

Grief offers an opportunity for personal growth. For many people, it may eventually lead to renewed energy to invest in new activities and new relationships. Some people seek meaning in their loss and get involved in causes or projects that help others.

As a result of the pain they have suffered, some people find a new compassion in themselves. They may become more sensitive toward others that may strengthen relationships. Others find new meaning and independence they never knew they had before. Some may even find new emotional resources that had not been apparent before.

Embracing Your Grief

People who grieve have two choices: they can mask or stifle the emotions associated with their loss in their way of moving on and hoping to forget, which is an unhealthy way of dealing with it; or the other choice is to allow the grief process to naturally take place and seek healing and growth. Coping with a death or loss is slow and hard work. In order for growth to be possible, it is essential to allow oneself to feel all the emotions that arise, as painful as they may be, and to treat oneself with patience and kindness. The following are healthy reminders of this process:

1. Feel the Pain

Do not resist the pain - even give it precedence over other emotions and activities, because grief is a pain that will get in the way later if it is ignored. Realize that grief has no timetable. It can also reoccur, so expect the emotions to come and go for weeks, months or even years. While a showing of strength is admirable, it does not serve the need to express sadness, even when it comes out at unexpected times and places.

2. Talk About Your Sorrow

Take the time to seek comfort from friends who will listen. Let them know you need to talk about your loss. People will understand, although they may not know how to respond. If they change the subject, explain that you need to share your memories and express your sorrow.

3. Forgive Yourself

Forgive yourself for all the things you believe you should have said or done. Also forgive yourself for the anger, guilt and embarrassment you may have felt while grieving.

4. Eat Well, Exercise, and Get Adequate Sleep

Grief is exhausting. To sustain your energy, be sure to maintain a balanced diet. Exercise is also important in sustaining energy. Find a routine that suits you - perhaps walks or bike rides with friends or in solitude. Clear your mind and refresh your body. It is important to maintain a regular sleep schedule as much as possible.

5. Indulge Yourself

Be sure to pamper yourself by taking naps, read a good book, listen to your favorite music, get a manicure, go to a ball game, or rent a movie. Do something that is frivolous, distracting and that you personally find comforting.

6. Prepare for Holidays and Anniversaries

Holidays can be very difficult for many people. They often feel especially "blue" during these periods. For instance, the anniversary date of a death can be especially painful.

Even if you think you have progressed, these dates may bring back some of your painful emotions. Make arrangements to be with friends and family members with whom you are comfortable. Plan activities that give you an opportunity to mark the anniversary.

7. Seek Support

Grief support groups can help you recognize your feelings and put them in perspective. They can also help alleviate the feeling that you are alone. The experiences of sharing with others who are in a similar situation can be comforting and reassuring. Sometimes, new friendships grow through these groups - even a whole new social network that you did not have before.

Spirituality can add increased support for people dealing with grief and loss. For instance, prayer, meditation, scripture readings, etc. can provide comfort, help bring understanding and open a window of hope for the future. Many faith communities offer support groups for grief in addition to pastoral support.

There are specialized groups for widows and widowers, parents who have lost a child, victims of drunken drivers, etc. There are also groups that do not specialize. Check with your local hospice about the death of a loved one or other bereavement support groups for more information. If you find that you are in great distress or in a long-term depression, individual or group therapy from a mental health therapist who specializes in grief may be advisable. You can ask your doctor for a referral or call Lindner Center of HOPE at **513-536-HOPE** or visit **lindnercenterofhope.org**

Action Steps to Create a New Life for Yourself

Give yourself plenty of time to grieve. Once you find new energy, begin to look for interesting things to do. Take courses, donate time to a cause you support, meet new people, or even find a new hobby.

It is often tempting to try to replace the person who has died, for instance. Whether through adoption, remarriage,

or other means; this form of reconciliation often does not work.

Many people discover that there is hope after a death or loss. Death or loss takes away, but grief can give back. It is possible to recover from grief with new strengths and a new direction. By acting on our grief, we may eventually find peace and purpose.

1. Helping Those in Grief

You may know someone who has experienced a loss. Many of us feel awkward when someone dies for instance, and do not know what to do or say. The suggestions below are designed to help you help friends, family and coworkers who are grieving.

2. Reach Out to the Grieving Person

Show your interest and share your caring feelings. Saying the wrong thing is better than saying nothing at all. At the same time, avoid clichés like "It was God's will," or "God never gives us more than we can bear", or "At least she is not suffering." Do not say you know how it feels. Do say you are sorry for their loss and that you are available to listen. Be prepared for emotional feelings yourself. A death or loss can generate one's own questions and/or fears.

3. Listen

Your greatest gift to a grieving person can be your willingness to listen. Ask about the deceased or loss. Allowing the person to talk freely without fear of disapproval, will help create healthy memories. It is an important part of healing. While you cannot resolve the grief, listening can help.

4. Ask How You Can Help

Taking over a simple task at home or at work is not only helpful, it also offers reassurance that you care. Be specific in your offer to do something and then follow up with action.

5. Remember Holidays and Anniversaries

These can be a very difficult time for those who are in grief. Do not allow the person to be isolated. Remember to share your home, yourself, or anything that may be of comfort.

6. Suggest Shared Activities

Walking, biking or other exercises can be a good opportunity to talk, and a good source of energy for a tired body, mind or spirit.

7. Help the Grieving Person Find New Activities and Friends

Include grieving persons in your life. Grieving people may require some encouragement to get back into social situations. Be persistent, but try not to press them to participate before they are ready.

8. Respond to Warning Signs

Signs that the grieving person is in distress might include weight loss, substance abuse, depression, prolonged sleep disorders, physical problems, talking about suicide, and/or lack of personal hygiene.

Observing these signs may mean the grieving person needs professional help. If you feel this is the case, a suggestion from you (if you feel close enough to the person), or from a trusted friend or family member may be appropriate. You might also want to point out community resources that may be helpful.

References:

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross
www.ekrfoundation.org

Hospice of Cincinnati
www.hospiceofcincinnati.org

Lindner Center of HOPE
Spiritual Care
www.lindnercenterofhope.org/spiritualcare

MHA- Mental Health America
Coping with Bereavement
www.nmha.org