

THE JOURNEY OF LOSS AND GRIEF: An Overview

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Losing someone you love can be an inevitable yet challenging part of living. Each of us experiences this journey differently and there is a full range of “normal” responses unique to each mourner. Like rafting down a river, grief can present us with strong feelings that can threaten to overwhelm us, but also redemptive, quiet moments that make us truly aware of the gift of loving someone and being human. Grief is a journey of healing and is often characterized by many different feelings that re-surface and re-cycle as time moves us beyond the original point of our loss. Although the following reactions are presented as what's common through time, the process is not linear, but instead our feelings can cycle through these stages as time goes on.

COMMON REACTIONS TO GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT

1. **Shock:** Feeling unreal, numb or “in a daze” is a normal initial reaction to loss. Often people have many physical symptoms such as a lack of appetite, exhaustion, insomnia or excessive sleeping. Grief responses may also be experienced in the form of bodily sensations of pain in different parts of the body, tightness in the chest and throat, panic attacks or dizziness. Distraction and an inability to concentrate are also common.

2. **Searching and yearning:** As some of the numbness and denial recede, the bereaved often search to connect to the person they've lost. This may be by surrounding themselves with possessions or mementos of the person who has died as a way of linking them to the deceased. The bereaved may also feel a desire to separate from the world in order to continue to be in relationship with the person who has died. Feelings of anger and guilt often may arise as people try to understand the “why” of what has happened. This is a time that may challenge our spiritual beliefs and values. Sharing these feelings with someone you trust, a counselor or clergy member is important. Staying connected to loved ones who support you can be a great comfort and help at this time.

3. Disorganization and disorientation: Because our loved one is part of who we are, it takes time to internalize the new reality; feelings of disorientation are part of the task of re-organizing our internal sense of self without the physical presence of the person who has died. The feeling of disorientation can also be reflected in the mourner's experience in the world. Our society assumes the grief process to be brief; after an initial period of mourning, people are expected to go back to their own lives and avoid talking about the loss. Continuing to talk about the loss, however, is important for bereaved persons and also prevents the mourner from being socially isolated. Joining a bereavement group may be very helpful at this time.

4. Adjustment and "meaning making:" This is an ongoing process that may continue for many months or years. As the mourner begins to adjust to the new reality, she begins to put together a unique "story" of her loss, identifying what has been lost and the meaning of this loss in her life. There is often a sense of continued connection to the loved one and a renewed sense of self as a survivor of the experience. Mourners may feel a desire to be more social, have increased energy and more consistent eating and sleeping habits. There is a re-invigorated desire to be a part of life with the awareness of the loss and the meaning of the loved one's contribution to life. At this point, mourners may decide to honor their loved one's passing by creating a memorial or making a donation in their name. Although the bereaved has fully recognized the new reality of the loss, mourners often report that they still feel in a relationship with their loved one who is somehow internally "present" to them.

DEALING WITH COMPLICATED LOSS...SUDDEN OR UNEXPECTED LOSS

Sudden losses like those resulting from suicide and murder are traumatic, and often are more challenging than death from a long illness or old age. Striking suddenly, there is no way to prepare. Often they can seem to conflict with our sense of security and can feel like they shatter those assumptions of our safety in the world. You may experience greater anxiety, nightmares and other sleep disturbances, and distressing thoughts and feelings such as anger, guilt and helplessness.

TIPS FOR COPING

- **Remember that grief is a normal reaction to loss.** There is a wide range of normal feelings and reactions that change over time. The process of grief has often been compared to a marathon rather than a sprint and is unique to each mourner – there is no "right" way to grieve a loved one.
- **Participate and create memorial rituals.** Memorial services and personal rituals help people get through the early days of the loss and honor the person who has died.
- **Seek support from others.** It is important not be isolated but to find solace in the comfort offered by friends and family.
- **Express yourself.** Find ways to express your feelings, if not by talking with others, perhaps in a more private way, such as keeping a journal. Ask for what

you need, whether it's time by yourself or a chance to share thoughts about the person who has died.

- **Move your body.** Exercise has been found to be as helpful as medication in relieving a depressed mood. It can also be comforting to exercise with others. Find time in your schedule to walk with a friend or go to the gym.
- **Eat right.** Your mood can be impacted by hunger. Take care of your body by feeding it nutritious food.
- **Join a support group.** Many bereaved individuals have found comfort in sharing experiences with others who are facing a similar challenge. See our resource section for some support groups in your area.
- **Seek out professional grief counselors.** Even a few sessions with a counselor can be helpful at the time of loss, at the anniversary of the loved one's death, or at a time or season tied to feelings of loss. A professional may be able to arm you with helpful suggestions that friends and family members cannot.

SUPPORT FOR SOMEONE YOU LOVE

The most important thing you can do for the mourner is to be there. There is often a great deal of support right after a death. Yet once the funeral is over, support wanes as people attend to their own lives and resume their daily routines and schedules. This is an important time for friends and family members to be present for the bereaved. People grieve in many different ways. Sometimes it is difficult for them to talk about their loss and sometimes it is essential that they do. It is important that you let the mourner know that you care and support them and encourage them to talk about their loss when they are ready. The most important thing you can do is let them know you're there for them and LISTEN.

DO'S AND DON'TS FOR SUPPORTING A BEREAVED ADULT

Do...

- Offer your support unconditionally and patiently
- Offer physical comfort if they want it: a hug, a pat on the back or arm or sitting close can often be comforting
- Take time to listen: use open-ended questions, like "how are you doing?"
- Ask what you can do to help
- Stay in contact by phone or email
- Don't minimize their grief - express your concern and empathize with their loss
- Talk openly about the person who has died
- Share your own emotions – if you feel sad, it's ok to cry
- Remember that holidays, evenings, weekends and anniversaries can be more difficult. Check in with the mourner or plan a special get together to help them get through a challenging day.

Don't...

- Offer advice or quick solutions
- Try to cheer them up or distract them from their sadness
- Minimize or avoid talking about their loss
- Rationalize: “she’s out of pain now” or “it was God’s will”
- Encourage the bereaved to self medicate with alcohol or drugs as a short term solution
- Avoid the bereaved person

SUPPORTING A BEREAVED CHILD

Children grieve according to their developmental understanding. They also look to adults to help them make sense of their loss or to guide their reactions. It is important to give children an honest but developmentally understandable explanation of what has happened. Continuity of daily life and consistency of caregivers/parents is important. Children need to know that they are safe, loved and not responsible for the death. Using simple and concrete language while gently explaining the death helps a child understand what has occurred. Asking them what questions they might have helps the child express their reactions or any misconceptions. Many young children often blame themselves and an open discussion can help them see they are not at fault. Creating an open atmosphere to talk and express your feelings of loss and to hear your child’s concerns is important. As human beings, we cope better when we feel connected to those we love, and grief is a journey best taken together rather than alone.

Children’s **behavior** is usually a key to their thoughts and feelings, which are acted out in their interactions with others. Also, after a loss children’s behavior often regresses to that which may seem younger than their actual age. This is usually temporary and will dissipate with support and consistent daily care.

GUIDELINES FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN BY AGE

Children 5 and younger:

Children younger than five years old still experience the world through “magical thinking.” They may not understand that death is final or that the person’s self has left the body and that it stops breathing. They may be frightened or focused on the idea of what happens to the deceased’s body. They need to have simple, concrete explanations of death. Children of this age are also very egocentric and may think that the person died because of something they did. Helping them understand that their loved one is still in their heart, that death is a natural part of life, and had nothing to do with their behavior should be part of explaining what has happened. Children may be temporarily more “clingy,” have some difficulty sleeping, and perhaps experience nightmares or bedwetting. If this persists you may want to seek professional help.

Children 6 – 10 years:

In this age range, children generally understand that death is final. They may experience strong feelings of sadness, anger or agitation. They may often want to talk about the deceased or dream about them. Remembering their special relationship with the deceased through family discussions or rituals can be helpful. At this age, children may experience some difficulties with concentration, schoolwork or behavioral problems. They may act out their feelings by arguing with friends, teachers and caregivers. Addressing these issues with teachers and implementing flexibility and extra support at school is essential while the child is actively attempting to come to terms with his loss. Sustained or escalated behavioral problems, social isolation or problems with friends are signs that may be indicative of a need for professional assistance.

Children 10 – adolescence:

Children in this age range have a greater capacity to seek and understand the abstract meaning of death. As they are also beginning to grapple with their own sense of who they are as an individual, they begin to understand the death in terms of how it affects them and what it means to them personally. A death at this time may create a feeling of insecurity and a need for closeness, conflicting with their developmental desire to be more autonomous. Relationships with peers are an important support at this time. Adolescents may suppress their feelings around their family and seem detached or indifferent. It is important to maintain a connection with your adolescent. Symptoms of depression, isolation, or a lack of interest in school or friends is a warning sign that they are having trouble adjusting.

SUGGESTIONS FOR SUPPORTING BEREAVED CHILDREN

Do...

- Allow the child to attend the funeral if they want to
- Communicate your spiritual values about life and death
- Have regular family meetings or check in to see how everyone is doing
- Help the child find ways to memorialize their loved one
- Keep their daily routine as consistent as possible
- Pay attention to the child's play and behavior: this is the way children communicate
- Respond encouragingly to his/her questions or desire to communicate about the death and talk about the deceased
- Express your own feelings - it's ok to be sad in front of your child

Don't...

- Give false or confusing messages: "God took grandpa to heaven"
- Tell a child to stop crying or shut down her emotional reactions
- Force a child to do something he/she feels unable to in the first 3 – 6 months

- Rely on your child to support you.
- Share information that they are not equipped to handle (financial worries, etc.)

WHAT TO SAY, WHAT TO WRITE WHEN YOU WANT TO SUPPORT THE BEREAVED:

Knowing what to say or write to someone whose loved one has died is often the most challenging aspect of supporting a friend or relative. Western culture often de-constructs or avoids the subject of death, yet cards and phone calls are an essential part of supporting the bereaved.

Guidelines for writing a bereavement note:

1. Be direct and honest - express your empathy and concern
2. Remember the deceased - acknowledge their life and the contribution they made, or a memory that you might want to share
3. Offer the support that you can realistically give; this may be an offer to run errands, exercise together, check in or get together when they feel ready (make sure you don't make a promise you can't keep, and follow up on your offer)
4. A few simple words such as "thinking of you" is better than not corresponding at all. Don't worry about writing the "right words." Sending a few lines of simple support can make a big difference for the bereaved.

Guidelines for what to say:

1. Acknowledge the loss.
2. Ask directly about how they are doing. Use open-ended questions: "How are you coping?" "What's most difficult?"
3. Offer your support – ask how you can help
4. Take the initiative: continue to check in, drop off a casserole, offer to watch their children so they can have a break, drop them a note or call from time to time. Plan to pick up your casserole dish at a later date and spend a few minutes checking in on how they are doing if possible.

WHEN TO SEEK HELP

The journey of grief is unique to each individual and situation both in terms of feelings and the amount of time it takes. However, for some it may be a more challenging process. When death is *complicated* by circumstances such as suicide, murder, acts of violence, sudden or unresolved death or the death of a child, it may have a more intense impact on people. The grief process in these cases may be complicated by symptoms of trauma when the loss is perceived by the mourner to be outside the normal rhythm of life.

Grief is a normal reaction to loss with reactions that diminish over time. Trauma is a disabling collection of symptoms such as overwhelming anxiety, feelings of being

unsafe, ruminative thinking and hypervigilance that interrupt the grief process and your life, leaving you feeling psychologically vulnerable.

Symptoms indicating that a person should seek professional help:

- Feelings of worthlessness
- Preoccupation with death
- Inability to work or function at home
- Nightmares/flashbacks
- Loss of a sense of the future/hopelessness
- Feeling constantly vulnerable, hyper-vigilance, mistrust
- Panic attacks
- Overwhelming guilt
- Loss of a sense of self; a feeling of de-personalization or being unreal

THE JOURNEY: MYTHS AND MISPERCEPTIONS

1. *“It’s been almost six months – shouldn’t you be back to normal?”*
A common misconception that life goes on as usual after a short period of grief. In reality, the mourner’s life has changed significantly with the loss of the loved one, and the time it takes to regain their equilibrium is different for each person and each loss. In fact, average recovery time has been estimated from 18 – 24 months.
2. *“You just need to jump back into life”*
Friends and relatives are often uncomfortable with death, and so they often encourage the bereaved to “get back to normal”.
While maintaining daily routines is important, individuals dealing with grief often need time to themselves to accommodate their loss and the major impact it has made in their life.
3. *“It is better not to discuss the loss with the bereaved person”*
Often this is just the opposite from what is needed. Grievers are often comforted by talking about their loved one, remembering the good and difficult times and discussing the feelings they are having.
4. *“You look great!”*
Statements like this are often made in an effort by friends and family in order to encourage the bereaved to feel better and get on with life, but it often feels as though it minimizes the process engulfing the grieving. Grief has been characterized as an emotional cycle that re-occurs over time in a range of reactions and feelings such as shock, anger, sadness, regret, betrayal, etc. Mourners often uniquely ride the waves of these different emotions as they accommodate their new reality. To be most supportive, one should ask the

bereaved how they are doing. Empathic listening is the best gift you can give to those who have experienced the death of someone they love.

5. *“It was the will of God” or “It was better that she...died now; is free of pain, etc.”*

Instead of comforting the griever, this sort of rationalization can serve to frustrate and even undermine the support that faith in God can give at this time.

Statements of faith should focus on God’s love and support as illustrated by the suggestion: “God’s love can help you through this difficult time” or “Our prayers and love are with you now.”

Dr. Suzanne McCarthy is a licensed psychologist, experienced in working with individuals, families and couples coping with issues of loss and grief. She is also a certified Emotionally Focused therapist, as well as having advanced training in issues of trauma. She is a member of the Harvard Medical School faculty.