

Coping with Grief and Loss

Everyone experiences loss and grief as a normal part of living. All loss is painful; some losses are more painful than others: loss because of the death of a loved one, a divorce, the loss of a job, loss of friends because of a move or retirement. Loss brings with it another normal human response – grief.

Grief is a normal, necessary and natural part of healing from loss. Like you rest when you are tired, or eat when you are hungry, you grieve when you feel loss. It can be difficult and exhausting, and there is always a temptation to “get over it quickly and move on.” But keeping your grief hidden can lead to serious emotional and physical problems. Unresolved grief can lead to depression, anxiety, illness, alcohol or drug abuse, or even suicide.

Experts say that grieving can last a year or longer, depending on the individual and the circumstances of the loss. Each person expresses grief differently; the key to healing from a loss is to give yourself all the time you need to heal. If you have experienced a severe loss, you may go through several stages:

- **Shock.** You may feel numb or have disbelief or denial. It may seem like the world has fallen apart.
- **Emotions.** Crying, screaming and other emotional releases are normal. Cry as much and as often as you feel you must. It’s a natural healer and stress reliever.
- **Physical symptoms.** Insomnia or sleeping more than is usual for you, fatigue, loss of appetite – these are some of the physical symptoms of grief.
- **Depression.** You may feel you will never be happy again, or you may panic. But you *will* recover over time and eventually regain your happiness, if you give yourself time to grieve and heal.
- **Guilt.** Even if there is no factual reason for it, feeling guilty is normal. You may feel that you could prevent the loss “if only....” Forgive yourself.
- **Anger.** It’s not unusual to feel angry at the loved one who died, the job that was eliminated or other circumstances. Expressing your anger to someone else can help you work through these feelings. Eventually your anger will subside and you may find a renewed faith that you thought you lost.
- **Idealization and realization.** At first you might feel that the past was perfect and the future will never be as good. This is normal. As time goes on you’ll find out that the past was good *and* bad and the future may not be as bleak as you think.
- **Detachment.** As you begin to put the past in the past, you can develop new routines in your life.
- **Continuing your life.** Over time, if you have been grieving without blocking feelings, you will adjust to the loss and go on with your life.

These stages may not be present in all people, and can take longer for one person than another to work through the stages. Here are some tips for getting through this time:

- Be easy on yourself and give yourself time.
- Stay as active as you can – exercise, take a vacation, stay in contact with old friends and family.
- Avoid making major decisions such as selling your home or changing jobs, for at least a year.
- Avoid using alcohol or drugs to manage your feelings. This can lead to other problems and can actually delay the healing process and make grieving take longer.
- See a doctor or counselor if you feel very overwhelmed by feelings of sadness, feel suicidal or just can't seem to feel better after some time has passed. Support groups for grieving people can be a big help during this time, and a professional can help you access these services.

Children and Grief

Grieving is a very difficult and painful process for children. Often, with all the emotional turmoil surrounding a loss, the child's grief is overlooked. Children need love, attention, support and understanding from adults to help them with their grief. It helps you and the children to share your feelings, tears and memories with them.

Remember that children, especially young children, have limited understanding of death and its permanence. When you explain a death, do it in simple, real terms. Don't try to soften it with phrases like "Daddy's gone away" or "Grandma went to be with God." This may confuse the child or cause unrealistic views or feelings. Very young children may need to be told again and again that a loved one has died and will not return. Explain this as patiently and often as you must.

It's hard to discuss loss with children, but try to be as open and honest as possible and try to share as much as you can with the child. Silence can make children feel isolated. Giving extra hugs and holding hands goes a long way in easing a child's pain.

Children may feel responsible for a death, and may feel like they caused it by "being bad" or doing something wrong. Reassure the child that he or she is in no way responsible for the death.

Like adults, children grieve in phases. Give them all the time they need. They may be unresponsive for awhile, distracted at school or be anxious about separating from adults – this is all normal. Maintain daily routines and familiar surroundings and encourage the child to do things he enjoys, and continue to enjoy life.

Most people – children and adults – do not suffer lasting effects from loss, but sharing your feelings and getting help when you need it are important to everyone.

Adapted from "Coping with Grief and Loss" by Johns Hopkins WorkLife Program.