

Living with Loss and Grief



Introduction

Grief is the reaction we have to the losses in our lives. When you care for someone over many days, months, or even years, their illness and death have a deep impact on you, just as their life did. Illness and death bring us face to face with many of our most difficult emotions and lingering fears.

As you grieve, you may find yourself wondering if your feelings are normal. Keep in mind that everyone grieves in their own way, in their own time. There is no “right” way to express grief. It is a personal experience unique to each of us and presents itself differently each time we go through it.

Grief is personal and individual. You may go through some or all of the feelings described below.

Shock or Numbness

It is particularly common to feel shock or numbness when a death is sudden or unexpected. Even when a death is anticipated, it is difficult for our rational, logical minds to understand death. It is not at all uncommon to wonder why you don’t “feel” anything, that this can’t be “real.” It takes time to grasp the reality that at one moment a person was here then suddenly is gone. You may feel disconnected from what is going on around you. People often describe this as “I felt as though I was outside myself.” As your mind becomes able to recognize the reality of the loss, the numbness or disbelief will gradually fade away.

Longing

As the reality of the loss begins to sink in, you may find yourself longing and searching in your mind for the presence of the person who has died. You wish to see them, hear them, and touch them again. This is normal. Their presence in your life was part of who you are. Their absence seems unnatural. You miss them. It is not uncommon to think you hear their voice or sense their presence. These experiences may bring you a sense of peace or reassurance.

Sadness

There will surely be times when you are sad. A wave of sadness can happen when you least expect it and bring tears. It is good to allow yourself time to cry when this happens. Fighting sadness will only leave you more tired and with less energy to handle intense feelings. If you are uncomfortable expressing your sadness, recognize this as a valuable reason to find time to spend alone or with those you trust. If your grief is very deep you may feel fear along with this powerful sense of sadness. Emotional pain is often experienced physically. You may feel overwhelmed at times. That is normal, too. The intensity of your sadness may come and go in



intensity. When you are struggling, take a deep breath and remember that the pain will pass. That is the natural rhythm of grief.

Regret and Guilt

You may experience feelings of regret about something you feel you should have known to do or done better or sooner. You may find yourself examining disturbing memories and wonder if things would have been better had you done something differently. If you dwell on these feelings for long, it may be because you are blaming yourself for things that were never in your control. Remind yourself that you did the best you could as often as you could. Self-forgiveness is important work.

Anger

You may have upsetting memories. You might be angry with God, your loved one, or with your family. Anger is an active emotion. It feels more purposeful than regret or sadness. It is normal to feel angry at times. Look for ways to “blow off some steam” in ways that aren’t hurtful to yourself or others – play tennis, yell into a pillow, stomp your feet. Sometimes anger gives way to tears. That is ok, too. You will stop crying when the intensity of the feeling passes.

Sleeplessness

Especially soon after the death of a loved one, sleeplessness is common. At night, thoughts and feelings surface that can cause difficulty in falling asleep or in staying asleep during the night. If you can, get up and have a warm drink or do something you find soothing. Taking the time to talk out or write about your feelings during the day may help you rest more calmly at night. If sleep problems persist, discuss this with your health care provider. It is difficult to do the work of grieving when your body is not getting enough rest.

Forgetfulness

Difficulty concentrating, memory loss and confusion are bothersome but to be expected. Allow yourself to take your time. Try not to take on new or unfamiliar tasks. Make notes, you will need them. Don’t expect yourself to function at your usual capacity for a while. This phase will pass.

Relief

Mixed in with all the other emotions, you may find that you have a sense of relief. For so long, you may have been worried about how things would turn out. Now that you know, it is normal to feel relieved of the struggle, the responsibilities, and/or the worry. It is also normal to feel relieved that your loved one’s suffering is over. You may feel that death was a blessing. This does not mean that you did not care. This is a normal part of the grieving process and will lead you to a better understanding of your grief. Finding joyful moments amidst your grief is good. Feeling gratitude for the life you have is a valuable part of healing.



Physical Effects of Grief

It is very common to experience physical signs of grief. You may be fatigued or even exhausted. You may feel “butterflies” in your stomach, have no appetite, feel nauseated, or experience increased hunger if you find comfort in food. Headaches, tightness in your neck and shoulders, a feeling of general tension and even shaking can occur. You may feel weak, breathless or have heart palpitations. For your own well-being, tell your health care provider about any persistent or bothersome symptoms.

Take your time

Many things influence how we grieve. Our past encounters with loss and death influence our feelings. Our culture, faith, gender, and background affect how we grieve. Finding ways to attend to and express your grief will in time help you heal.

Take care of yourself. Grief work is good, honest, hard work that takes time and attention.

