

Grief - everyone's response is different

Grief is our response to the loss of something or someone. It is often thought that people experience grief in similar ways, but this isn't the case. Everyone experiences grief differently because our reaction depends on a range of individual factors, such as our personality, age, relationship with the deceased, cultural practices, the level of social support and our spiritual beliefs.

There is no 'right way' way to grieve. Misunderstandings about the grieving process can make the bereaved person question their feelings and sanity. Understanding what grief can be like, finding ways to safely express strong emotions and coming up with coping strategies can help you endure the pain that accompanies grief.

Grief isn't predictable

One model of grief that was popular, suggested that people progress through various stages such as denial, anger, bargaining and acceptance. We now know that grief includes a wide range of emotions, thoughts and behaviours. It doesn't help to think that grief will always happen in a predictable and orderly way – everyone moves through grief in their own unique way.

If you believe that grief will follow predictable stages, you are likely to expect a bereaved person to put the experience behind them within a certain time. The reality is that most of us will continue to grieve in subtle ways for the rest of our lives, even when we seem to be getting on with life.

A wide range of normal reactions

Grief includes a wide range of emotions, thoughts and behaviours. You may experience some or all of the following reactions, as well as many that aren't included in the list.

Some of the many reactions associated with grief include:

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Change in worldview
- Confusion
- Sadness
- Depression
- Sleeping difficulties
- Low self-esteem
- Difficulty concentrating
- Unable to cope
- Guilt and remorse
- Helplessness
- Hopelessness
- Loneliness
- Change of values and beliefs
- Relief
- Shock and disbelief.

Moving on with life

There is an expectation that accepting the death of a loved one means letting go of them and their memory. The reality is that many bereaved people continue to have a relationship with their loved ones for the rest of their lives through remembering them. Death ends a life, but it does not necessarily end a relationship.

You may like to talk about your loved one in general conversation or commemorate special events like the deceased's birthday. Keeping your relationship with the deceased 'alive' is a healthy, normal response. On the other hand, you may choose to keep your memories to yourself and grieve privately – and that can be healthy and normal too.

Looking after yourself is important

Losing a loved one is a shattering event that can affect you emotionally, physically and spiritually. Try to look after yourself. Consider:

- **Diet and exercise** – grief impacts on the body and can cause symptoms such as sleeplessness, anxiety and a range of physical symptoms. Take care of yourself by paying attention to diet and getting regular exercise. Make sure that you receive good medical care and try to develop a good relationship with your doctor.
- **Relaxation and sleep** – schedule time every day to wind down, using whichever method works for you. Meditation, tai chi, taking a bath, playing sport, reading, undertaking hobbies, listening to music or watching your favourite television program, may all be of benefit. Try to get adequate sleep – grief can exhaust you.
- **Care with drugs** – try to avoid drugs such as cigarettes and alcohol to help you manage your grief. They may temporarily dull your pain, but cause other health and behavioural difficulties. If medication is needed, consult your doctor.
- **Be realistic** – be kind and gentle to yourself. Accept that you need to grieve in ways that feel natural to you. Don't judge or criticise yourself for not coping as well as you think you should or others think you should.

Coping strategies

You may need to experiment to find out which strategies are most helpful for you. Suggestions include:

- **Crying** – some people feel that crying isn't appropriate. They are afraid that once they start crying, the tears won't stop. If you feel the need to cry, go ahead and do it. Crying is a normal human response to intense feelings. However, if there are no tears, it does not mean there is no grief. If possible, cry with someone, but many people prefer to cry alone, perhaps in the car or in the shower.
- **Time alone** – if you feel the need, schedule some time alone each day to focus on your feelings and express them in whichever way feels natural to you. For example, you may choose to pray, cry, look through photographs of your loved one or write a diary.
- **Activity** – sometimes, people find it important to engage in physical activity as a way of releasing tension and distracting themselves from the intensity of grief.
- **Time with your family** – schedule time to grieve as a family. This could include talking about the deceased, crying together and sharing your feelings.
- **Pampering** – include activities in your daily or weekly schedule that you enjoy. Choose the activity, if you can, that brings the greatest comfort.
- **Support team** – actively seek out support. This could include friends, workmates, doctors, community health centres, bereavement support groups or professional counsellors. Don't judge yourself if you don't feel like being around others.
- **Memorial** – you may like to write letters to the deceased person, plant a memorial tree, put together a special photo album or commemorate their life in whichever ways feels meaningful to you and those close to you.
- **Professional help** – see your doctor for help and referral if you feel unsafe: for example, if you're distressed enough to want to hurt yourself or someone else.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement Tel. (03) 9265 2111 or 1800 642 066
- A trained bereavement counsellor
- A bereavement support agency such as Compassionate Friends Tel. 1800 641 091, Mercy Grief Services Tel. (03) 9364 9838 or SIDS and Kids Tel 1300 308 307

Things to remember

- Losing a loved one to death can be a shattering event that affects you emotionally, physically and spiritually.
- There is no one correct way to grieve. Misunderstandings about the grieving experience can cause difficulties for the bereaved person and others in their life.
- The experience of grief depends on individual factors such as personality and age, the relationship with the deceased and spiritual beliefs.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

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