



Grief and Loss

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Grief is a very personal and individual experience, usually associated with death but also with any major changes in ones life. It can present in a number of different ways and there is no 'normal' or 'right' way to grieve. For most it is stressful and time-consuming (for some, all-consuming) and hard work. It can also be very variable, in that some days seem to be okay and then a trigger, such as a memory or an experience can set it off again.

CAUSES – SUDDEN OR EXPECTED

The causes can be either sudden or expected, either way the grief experienced can be just as debilitating.

In the case of sudden death it can be accidental or unexpected, possibly violent or as a result of suicide. Other life changes that can cause a grief reaction, may relate to a diagnosis of serious illness, sudden job changes such as redundancies, or any loss from theft, fire or other serious events. Sudden loss results in greater feelings of shock, possibly disbelief and confusion. In some situations it is compounded by not having had a chance to say good byes or prepare, in any way, for the changes.

Even when death or change is expected it can have a devastating effect. Death after a long illness or hospitalisation can allow for some degree of practical preparedness but it is still difficult to deal with the actual loss. There may be a greater sense of relief but it is still the end of the relationship.

For some people planned moves can create a degree of grief, such as moving away from home to study or to a new job. Although there can be a great deal of excitement and anticipation there is also a sense of loss of all that is familiar. Loss of relationships through divorce or separation can create very mixed feeling similar to those when someone actually dies.

PRACTICAL – REORGANISATION

There are a number of practical issues to consider fairly soon after a death, such as obtaining a death certificate and arranging a funeral, informing others of the death, life insurance claims, property settlements and wills.

With any life changing situation some of the issues that may have a noticeable impact relate to financial management, childcare responsibilities, income maintenance, travel requirements, work vs leisure time and accommodation arrangements.

With any of these considerations there are people around to assist you such as doctors, funeral directors, financial advisers and Centrelink staff.

SELF HELP

An important part of helping yourself is actually recognising that the grief process may have a significant impact on you and that some things will need to change as a result. Be gentle with yourself and give yourself time to heal. Keeping to some of your basic routines may be grounding, but try and cut back on other areas that demand more time and energy.

Physical self-care can be challenging, at times, in the face of strong emotions. It is important to look after yourself, to allow your body to cope with the many and varied feelings of grief. It is very difficult to cope with even the ordinary aspects of life if you are tired or hungry or not eating properly. Neglecting your physical wellbeing may also increase the likelihood of getting sick. Try to include regular nutritious meals and gentle exercise into your recovery plan.

Be aware of your normal levels of drug intake such as caffeine, nicotine, alcohol or stronger drugs. Although this might not be the time to cut back, be cautious about increasing your intake without medical advice. Some drugs will give a false sense of wellbeing that can make the reality of loss even harder in their absence.

Some people find it very difficult to know how to express these extreme emotions or feel that tears are a sign of weakness. Others feel guilty at the lack of tears – tears are not the only way to express grief. It may be a time where you find yourself moody and intolerant

of others. Although they may be understanding of this for a period of time, they also have a right to be treated with respect. The reality is that finding a way of safely expressing these emotions is part of the healing process, and holding back from doing so may actually be more harmful in the long term. Safe expression can be in the form of talking about your emotions with a trusted friend, writing or journaling or spending time reflecting on the nature of that which has been lost. Writing letters to the deceased can sometimes be helpful.

If things do not improve after a month or two it may be necessary to seek further support through your doctor, counsellor or a grief support group, friends or family. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness; it is a sensible way to assist in the healing process.

THOUGHTS AND EMOTIONS

- Denial
- Guilt, remorse, anger
- Sadness, tearfulness
- Anxiety
- Disorganised, confused, chaos
- Forgetfulness
- Lack of concentration
- Reliving event, preoccupation with event
- Moodiness
- Lack of motivation
- Low tolerance
- Despair, helplessness
- Shock, numbness
- Ashamed/embarrassed by lack of emotional control
- Yearning for, or missing the person
- Relief that pain, suffering is over
- Vengeful – feeling that they deserved it
- Jealous/resentful of others' relationships
- Meaning of life questions
- Loneliness, being 'left behind'

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

Physical symptoms of grief and loss may include any or all of the following:

- nausea
- tiredness
- wakefulness
- nightmares
- headaches
- over/under eating
- more prone to illness
- crying

SUICIDE

Finding out that someone you know has committed suicide can bring up some other emotions as well – devastation, horror, guilt, shock, confusion and the feeling of having been deserted. There can be a great deal of guilt for someone left behind as you can often feel as if you should have known, or should have done something differently – that possibly you could have prevented it. There can also be guilt because you didn't take their feelings seriously enough and provide more support.

It is important to support yourself at this time with a 'no blame' approach. In the end it was the choice of the individual to do this and not to seek adequate help, or convince those around them of the seriousness of their need. It can be tempting to describe the death as something else other than suicide, to try and invent 'better' reasons for why they died. It is usually easier in the long term to tell people the simple truth rather than make 'excuses' for someone else's decision.

When discussing suicide with children or young people, again, it is more helpful to be truthful, using age appropriate language. Children can benefit from a discussion, in general terms, about how people get to that stage of depression and helplessness. This can then be further developed into a discussion about the different ways of supporting yourself and working out alternative solutions. For children, it is useful for them to identify who they can turn to should they ever feel sad or helpless, so they know they have options other than suicide.

HELPING OTHERS THROUGH GRIEF

When a friend is grieving there are a number of things you can do to assist them although it is important that you realise you cannot 'fix' the grief, any more than they can. It is not necessarily helpful to avoid them as they may feel deserted in their hour of need, but respect their wishes should they ask for privacy to mourn.

When supporting someone from a different cultural or religious background to yourself, it can be confusing or confronting when they behave in unexpected ways. Usually it is not rude to ask how these ceremonies or situations are dealt with in their culture, particularly as it allows you to provide more appropriate, sensitive support.

Understand that grief can take many forms and there is no right or wrong way to grieve, no defined process or timeframe. Support them without judging their preferred way of grieving. If you have concerns for their health or wellbeing because of extreme behaviours, encourage them to get some professional advice from a doctor or counsellor.

You may find that the grieving person will be more moody, emotional and demanding. Try and be tolerant of this and not take it personally, as it may only be a reaction to the grief. It is okay to remind them gently that some hurtful behaviour is not acceptable.

For some people, where they are not comfortable talking about death or accepting emotional support, it may be easier to provide practical support. This can be in the form of providing meals, doing housework or laundry, running errands or providing childcare.

As a friend it can be easy to provide support at the time of the crisis and then slowly resort back to your normal interactions. For a grieving person the grief may continue for a much longer period and may re-surface on important anniversaries or special dates. As a friend, it can sometimes be helpful to make a note of some of these dates, as it may help you support your friend if they appear to be struggling at times.

Avoid comparing grief experiences, or making statements like "look on the bright side" or "you'll get over it".

CHILDREN

Children grieve in a similar way to adults and it is best to be honest with them about what has happened and talk to them about what is going on around them using age appropriate language. Children are quick to pick up inconsistencies and may feel left out or deceived. Be aware of the role model that you can provide for children about expressing grief and seeking help when necessary. Depending on the age of the child it may be appropriate to ask them if they want to do anything special such as tree planting or painting special pictures. Involve the child in decisions where possible, such as how to tell their teacher or classmates what has happened.

Children are adaptable and may seem to be unaffected by loss, and their natural sense of fun and laughter can be frowned upon by grieving adults around them. Try and maintain the routines and boundaries that represent continuity of care and love for the child.

MEMORIES, ANNIVERSARIES AND HOLIDAYS

Special times and places can reignite feelings of grief with the absence of significant people. Acknowledge the event and that things have changed. Traditions may need to be changed and roles passed on to others. Give yourself time to reflect on your feelings. Find support and try not to isolate yourself.

Commemorative tree planting or plaques, photo albums, journals and stories may provide an outlet. Some people start a memento box to be opened on special occasions.

There can be guilt about having moved on, of having fun without a significant person. Sometimes it helps to think about what they would have liked for you and your future.

TIMELINES

After a period of time has passed many people judge themselves harshly about their recovery (“I should be over it by now”) and they may also hear others express similar opinions about their recovery – “you should be ...”, “you should do ...” With grief there are no ‘shoulds’ and no rules for recovery. Major loss is a life

changing event and will take time to recover from, and for each person it is a unique and individual process. Give yourself permission to ‘throw away the clock’ as there are no set timeframes for when things will be OK again. If others offer unwanted advice be assertive about your need to manage your grief for yourself as part of your healing. Do, however, consider the validity of their observations, but remember you are the only one to understand the full context of what any particular loss may mean for you. Only you can understand the full impact it may have on you. Be encouraged that healing is possible, but be gentle with yourself along the way.

NEED MORE HELP?

Student Counsellors are available by appointment at Student Services to discuss any of the issues detailed within this fact sheet. You may also like to make contact with:

- Minister or spiritual leader
- Community Health or hospital social workers
- Centrelink social workers
- Doctors
- National Association for Loss and Grief
- Lifeline 13 1114