

# Coping with Death, Grief & Loss

## What is Grief?

- Grief occurs in response to the loss of someone or something. The loss may involve a loved one, a job, or possibly a role (student entering the workplace or employee entering retirement). Anyone can experience grief and loss. It can be sudden or expected; however, individuals are unique in how they experience this event. Grief, itself, is a normal and natural response to loss. There are a variety of ways that individuals respond to loss. Some are healthy coping mechanisms and some may hinder the grieving process. It is important to realize that acknowledging the grief promotes the healing process. Time and support facilitate the grieving process, allowing an opportunity to appropriately mourn this loss.

## Sudden versus Predictable Loss

- Sudden or shocking losses--due to events like crimes, accidents, or suicide--can be traumatic. There is no way to prepare. They can challenge your sense of security and confidence in the predictability of life. You may experience symptoms such as sleep disturbance, nightmares, distressing thoughts, social isolation, or severe anxiety.
- Predictable losses--like those due to terminal illness--sometimes allow more time to prepare for the loss. However, they create two layers of grief: the grief related to the anticipation of the loss and the grief related to the final loss.

## How Long Does Grief Last?

- The length of the grief process is different for everyone. There is no predictable schedule for grief. Although it can be quite painful at times, the grief process cannot be rushed. It is important to be patient with yourself as you experience the feelings and your unique reactions to the loss. With time and support, things generally do get better. However, it is normal for significant dates, holidays, or other reminders to trigger feelings related to the loss.
- Taking care of yourself, seeking support, and acknowledging your feelings during these times are ways that can help you cope.

## Normal Grief Reactions

When experiencing grief, it is common to feel . . .

- like you are "going crazy"
- unable to focus or concentrate
- irritable or angry (at the deceased, oneself, others, higher powers)
- frustrated or misunderstood
- anxious, nervous, or fearful
- like you want to "escape"
- guilt or remorse

- ambivalence
- numbness

### Stages of Grief:

- It is important to note that phases of grief exist; however, they do **not** depict a specific way to respond to loss. Rather, stages of grief reflect a variety of reactions that may surface as an individual makes sense of how this loss affects them. Experiencing and accepting all feelings remains an important part of the healing process.
  - **Denial, numbness, and shock**
    - This serves to protect the individual from experiencing the intensity of the loss.
    - Numbness is a normal reaction to an immediate loss and should not be confused with "lack of caring".
    - Denial and disbelief will diminish as the individual slowly acknowledges the impact of this loss and accompanying feelings.
  - **Bargaining**
    - At times, individuals may ruminate about what could have been done to prevent the loss.
    - Individuals can become preoccupied about ways that things could have been better, imagining all the things that will never be.
    - This reaction can provide insight into the impact of the loss; however, if not properly resolved, intense feelings of remorse or guilt may hinder the healing process.
  - **Depression**
    - After recognizing the true extent of the loss, some individuals may experience depressive symptoms.
    - Sleep and appetite disturbance, lack of energy and concentration, and crying spells are some typical symptoms.
    - Feelings of loneliness, emptiness, isolation, and self-pity can also surface during this phase, contributing to this reactive depression.
    - For many, this phase must be experienced in order to begin reorganizing one's life.
  - **Anger**
    - This reaction usually occurs when an individual feels helpless and powerless.
    - Anger may result from feeling abandoned, occurring in cases of loss through death.
    - Feelings of resentment may occur toward one's higher power or toward life in general for the injustice of this loss.
    - After an individual acknowledges anger, guilt may surface due to expressing these negative feelings.
    - Again, these feelings are natural and should be honored to resolve the grief.
  - **Acceptance**
    - Time allows the individual an opportunity to resolve the range of feelings that surface.

- The grieving process supports the individual. That is, healing occurs when the loss becomes integrated into the individual's set of life experiences.
- Individuals may return to some of the earlier feelings throughout one's lifetime.
- There is no time limit to the grieving process. Each individual should define one's own healing process.

**Factors that may hinder the healing process:**

- Avoidance or minimization of one's emotions.
- Use of alcohol or drugs to self-medicate.
- Use of work (over function at workplace or school) to avoid feelings.

**Guidelines that may help resolve grief**

- Allow time to experience thoughts and feelings openly to self.
- Acknowledge and accept all feelings, both positive and negative.
- Use a journal to document the healing process.
- Confide in a trusted individual; tell the story of the loss.
- Express feelings openly. Crying offers a release.
- Identify any unfinished business and try to come to a resolution.
- Bereavement groups provide an opportunity to share grief with others who have experienced similar loss.
- If the healing process becomes too overwhelming, seek professional help.

**Grief as a Process of Healing**

- Alan Wolfelt described "mourning needs," which include acknowledging the reality of the death, embracing the pain of the loss, remembering the person who died, developing a new self-identity, searching for meaning, and receiving ongoing support from others.
- It is important to note that the grief process is not linear, but is more often experienced in cycles. Grief is sometimes compared to climbing a spiral staircase where things can look and feel like you are just going in circles, yet you are actually making progress. Patience with the process and allowing feelings to come without judgment can help. If you feel stuck in your grief, talking to a counselor or a supportive person may help you move forward in the healing process.

**How Can You Cope with Grief?**

- |                             |                               |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| ▪ Talk to family or friends | ▪ Seek counseling             |
| ▪ Read poetry or books      | ▪ Engage in social activities |
| ▪ Exercise                  | ▪ Eat good foods              |
| ▪ Seek spiritual support    | ▪ Take time to relax          |
| ▪ Join a support group      | ▪ Listen to music             |
| ▪ Be patient with yourself  | ▪ Let yourself feel grief     |

- Each one of us has an individual style of coping with painful times. The list above may help you generate ideas about how to manage your feelings of grief. You may want to experiment with these ideas or create a list of your own. Talking to friends who have dealt with loss in the past can help you generate new ways of coping. Only you know what coping skills will fit best with your personality and lifestyle.
- One way to examine your own style of coping is to recall the ways you've dealt with painful times in the past. It's important to note that some ways of coping with grief are helpful, like talking to others, writing in a journal, and so forth. Others may be hurtful or destructive to the healing process, like substance abuse or isolation. Healthy coping skills are important in resolving a loss. They cannot take away your feelings of loss. They can, however, help you move forward in the healing process.

### **Ways to Cope with Death and Dying**

- Discuss feelings such as loneliness, anger, and sadness openly and honestly with other students, instructors and family members.
- Maintain hope.
- If your religious convictions are important to you, talk to a member of the clergy about your beliefs and feelings.
- Join a support group.
- Take good care of yourself. Eat well-balanced meals. Get plenty of rest.

Be patient with yourself. It takes time to heal. Some days will be better than others.