



GRIEF AND LOSS

WHAT IS GRIEF?

Grief is a normal and natural response to the death of a loved one. Whether the loss is of a family member, friend, spouse, dating partner, classmate, teammate, or co-worker, the grief is a universal experience for all humans.

At many points after a loss, the grieving person can benefit from the support of others. Individual grief reactions can vary widely, not only from person to person, but also within the same person over time. Accordingly, friends need to be ready to accept and support the griever through a wide range of emotions.

REACTIONS TO GRIEF

People who are grieving experience many reactions to their loss as they work toward resolution. At various times, but especially at first, the grieving person may experience intense and sometimes conflicting feelings or may deny that the loss has occurred. Strong feelings such as sadness, helplessness, loneliness, guilt, or anger can emerge. Experiencing and accepting these feelings as natural represents an important part of the recovery process. Ultimately, the grieving person reaches a point in the recovery process where the loss becomes integrated into his or her set of life experiences. They are now better able to carry out the tasks of daily living.

Throughout the recovery period people who are grieving will experience many reactions. Some of the following reactions may indeed be experienced many times:

1. Denial, shock, numbness -- reactions which distance the grieving person from the loss, thereby protecting him/her from being overwhelmed by emotions.
2. Emotional releases -- these reactions accompany realizations of different aspects of the loss, they frequently involve much crying, and they are often important to the healing process.
3. Reactive Depression -- natural feelings beyond sadness (e.g., feelings of loneliness, isolation, hopelessness, self-pity) which occur as the person more clearly recognizes the extent of the loss. For many, reactive depression is part of the necessary internal processing of the loss which the grieving person must go through before reorganizing his/her life.
4. Panic -- feeling overwhelmed, confused, fearful, unable to cope, and even believing something is wrong with oneself.
5. Remorse -- following a loss (whether through death, relationship breakup or disability) a grieving person sometimes become preoccupied with thoughts of what he/she might have done differently to have prevented the loss or to have made things better. This can be helpful as the person tries to make sense out of his or her situation but can also lead to unrealistic feelings of remorse or guilt.



6. Anger -- this is a frequent response to a perception of injustice and powerlessness. A significant loss can threaten the grieving person's basic beliefs about himself or herself or about life in general. As a result (often to the grieving person's bewilderment), they can feel anger not only at a person perceived as responsible for the loss, or at God or life in general for the injustice of the loss, but also -- in cases of loss through death -- at the deceased for dying.
7. Need to talk -- to recognize and come to terms with the impact of the loss, the grieving person may express feelings, tell stories and share memories, sometimes over and over with many different people.
8. Physical ailments -- in response to the emotional stress of grief, many people are more vulnerable to a variety of physical ailments over the six to 18 months following loss (e.g., colds, nausea, hypertension, etc.).

OBSTACLES OF GRIEF

Because responding to losses and death is often awkward and uncomfortable for both griever and helpers, those concerned may avoid dealing with grief. With the myth that college years are always "happy years" potential helpers don't even recognize that a student, employee, or friend is grieving. Additionally, the student may be living far away from others who are experiencing the same loss making the experience more lonely and unhappy than it might be otherwise.

There are many misconceptions about grief that may get in the way of recovery. Statements such as, "You must be strong," "you have to get on with your life," or "it's good that they didn't have to suffer" are rarely helpful to the griever. Other misconceptions may be that it is not appropriate to show emotions except at the funeral or that recovery should be complete within a certain amount of time or that it's not okay to laugh, play, or be productive at school or work. An individual may have both personal and cultural differences in the ways that they deal with grief; friends need to support the bereaved in recovering and restoring balance in their own way.

HOW TO HELP SOMEONE WHO IS GRIEVING

1. Take some kind of action. Make a phone call, send a card, give a hug, attend the funeral, help with practical matters (e.g., meals, care of children).
2. Be available. Allow the person time so there is no sense of "urgency" when you visit or talk.
3. Be a good listener. Accept the words and feelings expressed, avoid being judgmental or taking their feelings personally, avoid telling them what they feel or what they should do.
4. Don't minimize the loss and avoid giving cliches and easy answers. Don't be afraid to talk about the loss or the person who died.
5. Allow the bereaved person to grieve for as long or short a time as needed. Be patient, there are no shortcuts.



6. Encourage self-care. Help someone and remind them to attend to physical needs, postpone major decisions, and allow themselves to grieve and to recover.
7. Acknowledge and accept your own limitations. Many situations can be hard to handle but can be made easier with the help of outside resources -- books, workshops, support groups, other friends, or professionals.

SUPPORT FOR THE HELPER

Supporting a grieving person can also be stressful for the helpers; you need to take care of yourself while also helping the grieving person. Since helpers themselves are often grieving, you may need to address your own healing process. It's important to seek support from family, friends, clergy, or a mental health professional to express your emotions and help with your own grief.

FINAL NOTE

Just as there is no single pattern to grief, there is no single way to help a grieving person. Both the grieving person and any friend who is trying to help may feel unsure and uncomfortable. Either way, remember that it is important to be yourself. Furthermore, remember that as a friend, just by listening and being with the grieving person, you are helping.

CAMPUS RESOURCES FOR GRIEF AND LOSS

[Center for Well-Being](#)

[Counseling and Psychological Services](#)

[Campus Ministry](#)

[Dean of Students Office](#)