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IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

UNDERSTANDING THE GRIEF PROCESS

Grief is a journey of the mind and the heart. It is a process, not an event. While grief is commonly associated with the death of a loved one, it also is present with other types of losses – such as job loss, divorce or loss of a significant relationship, pet loss, relocation, children leaving home, aging – or due to unfulfilled hopes, dreams, and expectations in life. Grief is a normal human experience that is frequently overlooked and undervalued by Western culture. It is often labeled as depression. While depression describes one portion of the grief process, there are, in fact, many physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions to grief. This article will focus on the death of a loved one, although the descriptions and processes also generally apply to the wider array of losses.

Simply stated, grief is the emotional reaction that occurs when someone important to you dies, and mourning is the process of learning to live without that person being physically present in your life. From early infancy, we begin to form strong emotional bonds (attachments) with the significant people in our lives. This fundamental need to attach to others continues throughout life, leading people to seek love, friendship, comfort, and companionship. When someone we love dies, that physical and emotional attachment is abruptly cut off – the love and caring that would have been extended to and received from that person are gone forever.

Common Grief Reactions

While grief reactions are diverse and unique to each individual, the following are some of the most common responses:

Shock and disorientation. The loss of a significant person in one's life can create shock, disorientation, and disbelief that the person is actually gone. Attachment-seeking behaviors – such as waiting by the phone for the person to call, watching for him or her to drive up the driveway, calling out to him or her, or seeing someone who looks similar on the street and thinking it is the deceased – continue for a period. The desire for the loved one's return can be strong, and full acceptance of the loss usually does not happen immediately.

Deep sadness. This is the most common feature of grief. It may or may not be expressed with tears depending on gender, personality, cultural influences, and the nature of the loss.

Anger. There may be anger at oneself for not doing enough to keep the person alive or for not seeing him or her more often, or anger at the deceased for dying. The anger also may be directed toward God, doctors, family members, or friends. Anger can be confusing to those trying to comfort the bereaved, so know that it is a common, normal grief response.

Guilt. The person grieving may feel guilt over things said or unsaid or missed opportunities to enhance the relationship when the person was alive.

Anxiety. Anxiety can be mild or result in panic attacks. There may be concern about another loved one dying in a similar way. With sudden, unexpected death, assumptions about the predictability of life are shattered, creating apprehension about the future.

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Physical, behavioral, and cognitive dysfunction. Those experiencing grief may find it difficult to sleep, or they may sleep all the time. They are likely to be very fatigued, unmotivated, and uninterested in activities they formerly enjoyed. Eating habits may change, and the usual self-care may be put on hold. Inability to concentrate, some memory loss, and general confusion are also common.

During grief, some or all of these responses may occur and reoccur. Think of them as a spiral with lessening degrees of intensity, rather than as discrete, linear stages. People often grieve in small doses; they may work at their jobs during the day and spend evenings at home, or with a friend, in tears. This gradual process allows the healing to run a natural course.

Grief Recovery

The ultimate goal of grief recovery is to come to terms with the permanence of the death and to learn how to live without the loved one. Recovery is not about giving up memories or ignoring or denying the importance of the relationship that has been lost; rather, it is about finding a different way to hold on to the loved one, not to let go. The deceased will be held in one's heart and mind forever; the task of mourning is relocating the physical presence of the deceased to a new space in one's emotional life.

People often ask how long the grief process will take. The appropriate response is as long as necessary. Grief has no timeline. Once the initial acute reactions subside, the grieving person experiences an ongoing adjustment in day-to-day life without the other person present. Special occasions, holidays, vacations, and other shared rituals can trigger new waves of sadness.

While many cultures have prescribed rituals for mourning, American culture generally lacks such normative behaviors and has grown increasingly uncomfortable with expressed sadness. There is a tendency to encourage people to get over their grief and move on. Sadness may create discomfort for others, so, unfortunately, many experiencing emotional pain tend to isolate themselves. Grief, however, is best handled in community; it should not be a solitary process. Having another present when one is in despair can be grounding, comforting, and an essential part of the recovery process. Grief support groups and community resources provide a valuable means of being with others who have experienced similar losses.

Helping Others in Their Grief

The following are some suggestions for reaching out to someone who is grieving:

Contact. Take the time to call, e-mail, or write a note and let the grieving person know you are thinking about him or her.

Be practical. If you can do something practical to help, just do it. The bereaved may not have the mental focus or energy to know what he or she needs at that moment.

Be a good listener. Listen to stories about the loved one as many times as they may need to be told.

Exercise patience, acceptance, and caring. Talk to the grieving person about the loved one who has died. People frequently do not want to mention the deceased for fear of causing more distress. However, the person grieving often wants to know that others remember the beloved.

Encourage self-care. When the person is ready, invite him or her to join you on outings or other activities. If the person declines, respect his or her wishes without trying to convince the person otherwise. The offer is meaningful, and there will likely come a time when the invitation will be accepted.

Avoid clichés. Comments such as "He is better off now," "She is happy in heaven," "You need to get on with your life," or "You should feel relieved that her suffering is over" are generally not helpful and are better left unsaid. Those grieving want their loved one alive and with them; their grieving is a process for them of trying to make sense of their life without their loved one.

One Person's Story

About six years ago, a young woman came to my office and began her grief process. She had experienced the traumatic, tragic loss of a close friend. The following sessions were painful, sad, and filled with tears and despair. Mementos from her friend had been tucked away in a box that she opened each month on the anniversary of his death. It would have been far too painful for her at that time to have any daily reminders of him in her home.

As time passed, the healing process progressed. She felt herself adjusting as she became able to visit

his grave and again as she found she began to cry less during our sessions. Eventually, she placed a framed picture of her friend on a table in her home and was able to embrace the positive things he brought to her life. Eventually, she could remember him without deep sadness. In time, she found a place for him in her emotional being. Eventually, she left my office feeling positive about where she was in life.

Recently, she once again found herself sitting across from me, facing another significant loss. She did not want to be in this grieving place again. I asked her how I could support her, and she responded without hesitation, “I want you to tell me it will be okay.” And deep down she knows she will be okay. She knows she will mourn her loss, she knows the grief will pass, and she knows she will find her bearings once again.

Conclusion

Grief is a normal and natural healing process that allows people to relocate a deceased loved one to a new place in their own emotional lives. It is a process of coming to terms with life as it is, of acceptance of mortality, and of once again experiencing the fullness of life. Grief generally does not happen without significant pain and sadness, but it is a restorative process and a necessary journey.

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Grief and Loss – Additional Resources

- The Dougy Center – www.dougy.org – grief support for children, teens, and young adults
- The Compassionate Friends – www.compassionatefriends.org – grief support following the loss of a child
- *Gentle Closings: How to Say Goodbye to Someone You Love*, Ted Menten (Running Press, 1992)
- *A Journey Through Grief: Gentle, Specific Help to Get You Through the Most Difficult Stages of Grieving*, Alla Renee Bozarth (Hazelden, 1994)
- *The Journey Through Grief and Loss: Helping Yourself and Your Child When Grief Is Shared*, Robert Zucker (St. Martin's Griffin, 2009)
- *The Grief Recovery Handbook: The Action Program for Moving Beyond Death, Divorce, and Other Losses including Health, Career, and Faith*, John W. James and Russell Friedman (William Morrow Paperbacks, 2009)
- *Tear Soup*, Pat Schweibert and Chuck DeKlyen (Grief Watch, 2005)
- *A Decembered Grief: Living with Loss While Others Are Celebrating*, Harold Ivan Smith (Beacon Hill Press, 2011)