

# Grief and Loss

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## What is Grief?

**Grief** is the sad, unhappy feelings we experience when we lose something precious. Experiencing grief when you lose something precious is a normal reaction to an 'abnormal' situation. 'Abnormal' in that it is not part of the person's usual experience, but it is (usually) a normal part of life.

Unhappy and unexpected events happen to us all at some time in our lives. Serious events such as the death of a loved one, a severe disability, or losing a job can take us by surprise. The more serious the loss, the more intense the grief we feel.

Grief is usually worse if the event is unexpected. The intensity of the loss is a very individual experience. What matters seriously to one person may be quite different for someone else. It is therefore not wise to assume that you can understand exactly what someone else is feeling, although if you are empathic, you will get a sense of it.

There are common factors in the grief experience, as otherwise we could not talk about it or have an idea what it might be like for others. Factors that affect how a person experiences and deals with grief include personality type, coping skills, life experience, where you are in life right now (such. whether you are dealing with other stressors apart from the loss itself), your state of health, and the type of relationship you had with the person or the loss.

## Symptoms of Grief

Knowing what to expect helps you to manage grief. Often people don't know what to expect and may worry that something is wrong when they experience feelings they are not used to. You are in an out-of-the-ordinary situation, so you may well have feelings you have not had before. Symptoms of grief include both emotional and physical reactions:

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|--------------------|------------------------------|
| ◆ Aches and pains  | ◆ Guilt                      |
| ◆ Appetite changes | ◆ Laughing                   |
| ◆ Anger            | ◆ Nausea                     |
| ◆ Crying           | ◆ Sadness                    |
| ◆ Disbelief        | ◆ Shock                      |
| ◆ Fatigue          | ◆ Sleep Disturbance          |
| ◆ Fear             | ◆ Weight change – up or down |

There is no right or wrong way to experience grief. You may not experience these symptoms but if you do, you will know that this is quite normal and there is nothing wrong with you.

## Stages of Grief

Different models are used to explain the stages of grief. Grief can be conceptualised as having 4 stages:

- 1) Numbness: feelings of unreality when you first learn of the loss.
- 2) Yearning: feelings of grief and sadness.
- 3) Despair: the feelings reach a more intense stage as realisation sets in.
- 4) Recovery: positive feelings emerge; acceptance of change, rebuilding of identity, periodic temporary sadness, confidence in the future.

## Managing Grief and Loss

Grief can involve intense emotions. Managing grief amounts to knowing how to deal with these strong emotions. Your feelings may linger or be up and down and change rapidly.

Taking care of yourself is the best thing you can do, both for yourself and for those others around you who are also experiencing grief.

- ◆ Allow yourself to feel the feelings that arise: don't stifle them. Let them flow and 'come out.' They will gradually settle. Suppressing them can lead to problems later – anxiety, depression, anger and other reactive feelings. It is okay to feel sad and express this by crying or talking to family members and friends or trusted professionals.
- ◆ Take care of your physical as well as your emotional health. Try to eat healthily even if you have little appetite. Watch your sleep and exercise. Take walks with someone you can talk to and say whatever comes to mind.
- ◆ Writing: some people find that by *doing* something they can express their feelings. Writing your feelings down, either as a journal or in the form of poetry can be a soothing experience.
- ◆ Creating a scrapbook of mementos can help you work through the grief in a tangible way.
- ◆ Talk to the person's friends, share experiences that you may not have shared before. It is surprising how friends of a deceased person who did not know each other can meet at a funeral and share different aspects of the person's life.
- ◆ You may discover interests the person had that you did not know about, causes they followed, such as sports or music. Spending a little time learning about or following these interests can be a sign of respect and help dissipate your grieving feelings.
- ◆ Seek out a support group. Check with your doctor or ask a local community health centre if they know of any support groups that deal with grief and loss. Talking with others and sharing your experiences helps you to feel less alone. This is especially important in cases of a severe loss, such as the death of a child.
- ◆ For help with children who are grieving, see information sheet: [Supporting Grieving Children](#).
- ◆ It is important to know that grief does not last forever. It is in our nature to recover and move on with our lives. This does not mean we do not ever experience sadness or 'nostalgia.' But it is a kind of 'sweet sadness,' tinged with acceptance and love.

We have incorporated the loss into our lives and our sense of identity. We have fully come to terms with what has happened, and we experience an inner peace and calm.

Recovery takes its own time, we just need to let it do its own work. Humans have an innate capacity to heal if we allow it to happen. If you would like to talk things over, do get in touch.