

COPING WITH GRIEF AND LOSS.

Losing someone or something you love is very painful. After a significant loss, you may experience all kinds of difficult and surprising emotions, such as shock, anger, and guilt. Sometimes it may feel like the sadness will never let up. While these feelings can be frightening and overwhelming, they are normal reactions to loss. Accepting them as part of the grieving process and allowing yourself to feel what you feel is necessary for the integration of the loss into our lives.

When someone close to us dies, not only do we lose that person on the physical level. We also face the loss of potential—what could have been. So our pain can involve missing that person's presence: sleeping in a bed that's half empty, craving the scent of their hair or longing for their embrace or just to hear his or her voice. More than that, we are almost constantly reminded of their absence, especially at certain life markers. If a spouse dies, we might wonder what life would have been like had that person survived. Would we have brought children into the world? How would we have celebrated our anniversary? When a child dies, at whatever age, we might imagine what kind of car they would have wanted or what grades they would have gotten at school.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve — but there are healthy ways to cope with the pain. You can get through it! Grief that is expressed and experienced has a potential for healing that eventually can strengthen and enrich life.

What is Grief.

Grief is a natural response to loss attributed to a spiritual and emotional suffering that we can feel when someone or something is taken away. The word itself was originally derived from the Old French word "grève," meaning a heavy burden. In English "grief" generally means an experience of deep sorrow, one that touches every aspect of our lives both spiritually, emotionally and in some cases physical toll on our lives. Grief can literally "weigh down" the person who must face the reality of a gut-wrenching loss. The more significant the loss the more intense the grief. Grief may be extremely painful but can be overcome if faced and experienced.

Grieving is a personal and highly individual experience. The grieving process takes time. Integration of our loss happens gradually; it can't be forced or hurried – and there is no "normal" timetable for grieving. Some people start to feel better in weeks or months. For others, the grieving process is measured in years. Whatever your grieving experience, it's important to be patient with yourself and allow the process to naturally unfold

Factor's influencing how we respond to a particular loss.

- ❖ The nature of the loss (what was our relationship like with that person? how did he or she die?)
- ❖ Our world view to suffering.
- ❖ Our world view on God.
- ❖ Personality and coping style.
- ❖ Our individual personalities and coping styles.
- ❖ Our experiences, including what we have learned about loss from others throughout our lives.
- ❖ The support we have in helping us cope with our loss.

Stages of Grief.

"They are not meant to tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grieving is as individual as our lives."

- ❖ *Shock and Denial* - "this can't be happening to me", looking for the former spouse in familiar places, or if it is death, setting the table for the person or acting as if they are still living there. Keeping the house just as it is, not packing up the cupboards. A struggle to accept or even acknowledge the loss.
- ❖ *Anger* - "why me?", feelings of wanting to fight back or get even with spouse of divorce, for death, anger at the deceased, blaming them for leaving, anger at medical staff, or one's own self or God.
- ❖ *Bargaining* - often takes place before the loss. Attempting to make deals with the spouse who is leaving, or attempting to make deals with God to stop or change the loss. Begging, wishing, praying for them to come back.
- ❖ *Depression* - overwhelming feelings of hopelessness, frustration, bitterness, self pity, mourning the loss of person as well as the hopes, dreams and plans for the future. Feeling a lack of control, feeling numb. Perhaps even feeling suicidal.
- ❖ *Acceptance* - there is a difference between resignation and acceptance. You have to accept the loss, not just try to bear it quietly. Realization that it takes two to make or break a marriage. Realization that the person is gone (in death) that it is not their fault, they didn't leave you on purpose. (even in cases of suicide, often the deceased person, was not in their right frame of mind.) Finding the good that can come out of the pain of loss, finding comfort and healing. Our goals turn toward personal growth. Stay with fond memories of person.

Contrary to popular belief, you do not have to go through each stage in order to heal. In fact, some people resolve their grief without going through any of these stages. And if you do go through these stages of grief, you probably won't experience them in a neat, sequential order, so don't worry about what you "should" be feeling or which stage you're supposed to be in.

Kübler-Ross five stages

Grief is a roller coaster not a series of stages.

It is best not to think of grief as a series of stages. Rather, we might think of the grieving process as a roller coaster, full of ups and downs, highs and lows. Like many roller coasters, the ride tends to be rougher in the beginning, the lows may be deeper and longer. The difficult periods should become less intense and shorter as time goes by, but it takes time to work through a loss. Even years after a loss, especially at special events such as a family wedding or the birth of a child, we may still experience a strong sense of grief.

Hospice Foundation

Symptoms of Grief.

While loss affects people in different ways, many people experience the following symptoms when they're grieving. Just remember that almost anything that you experience in the early stages of grief is normal – including feeling like you're going crazy, feeling like you're in a bad dream, or questioning your religious beliefs.

- ❖ Shock and disbelief - Right after a loss, it can be hard to accept what happened. You may feel numb, have trouble believing that the loss really happened, or even deny the truth. If someone you love has died, you may keep expecting them to show up, even though you know they're gone.
- ❖ Sadness - Profound sadness is probably the most universally experienced symptom of grief. You may have feelings of emptiness, despair, yearning, or deep loneliness. You may also cry a lot or feel emotionally unstable.
- ❖ Guilt - You may regret or feel guilty about things you did or didn't say or do. You may also feel guilty about certain feelings (e.g. feeling relieved when the person died after a long, difficult illness). After a death, you may even feel guilty for not doing something to prevent the death, even if there was nothing more you could have done.
- ❖ Anger - Even if the loss was nobody's fault, you may feel angry and resentful. If you lost a loved one, you may be angry at yourself, God, the doctors, or even the person who died for abandoning you. You may feel the need to blame someone for the injustice that was done to you.
- ❖ Fear - A significant loss can trigger a host of worries and fears. You may feel anxious, helpless, or insecure. You may even have panic attacks. The death of a loved one can trigger fears about your own mortality, of facing life without that person, or the responsibilities you now face alone.
- ❖ Physical symptoms - We often think of grief as a strictly emotional or spiritual process, but grief often involves physical problems, including fatigue, nausea, lowered immunity, weight loss or weight gain, aches and pains, and insomnia.

Myths and Facts About Grief

MYTH: The pain will go away faster if you ignore it.

Fact: Trying to ignore your pain or keep it from surfacing will only make it worse in the long run. For real healing it is necessary to face your grief and actively deal with it.

MYTH: It's important to be "be strong" in the face of loss.

Fact: Feeling sad, frightened, or lonely is a normal reaction to loss. Crying doesn't mean you are weak. You don't need to "protect" your family or friends by putting on a brave front. Showing your true feelings can help them and you.

MYTH: If you don't cry, it means you aren't sorry about the loss.

Fact: Crying is a normal response to sadness, but it's not the only one. Those who don't cry may feel the pain just as deeply as others. They may simply have other ways of showing it.

MYTH: Grief should last about a year.

Fact: There is no right or wrong time frame for grieving. How long it takes can differ from person to person.

Coping with Grief.

The single most important factor in healing from loss is having the support of other people. Even if you aren't comfortable talking about your feelings under normal circumstances, it's important to express them when you're grieving. Sharing your loss makes the burden of grief easier to carry.

Point 1: Finding support after a loss.

- ❖ Turn to friends and family members – Now is the time to lean on the people who care about you, even if you take pride in being strong and self-sufficient. Draw loved ones close, rather than avoiding them, and accept the assistance that's offered. Often times, people want to help but don't know how, so tell them what you need – whether it's a shoulder to cry on or help with funeral arrangements.
- ❖ Draw comfort from your faith – If you follow a religious tradition, embrace the comfort its mourning rituals can provide. Spiritual activities that are meaningful to you – such as praying, praying with others, meditating, or going to church – can offer solace. If you're questioning your faith in the wake of the loss, talk to others such as your pastoral counsellor, pastor, minister or someone else in your church community who you feel safe with.
- ❖ Join a support group – Grief can feel very lonely, even when you have loved ones around. Sharing your sorrow with others who have experienced similar losses can help. To find a bereavement support group in your area, contact local hospitals, hospices, funeral homes, and counselling centres.
- ❖ Talk to a therapist or grief counsellor – If your grief feels like too much to bear, call a mental health professional with experience in grief counseling. An experienced therapist can help you work through intense emotions and overcome obstacles to your grieving.

Point 2: Take care of yourself.

When you're grieving, it's more important than ever to take care of yourself. The stress of a major loss can quickly deplete your energy and emotional reserves. Looking after your physical and emotional needs will help you get through this difficult time.

- ❖ *Face your feelings.* - You can try to suppress your grief, but you can't avoid it forever. In order to heal, you have to acknowledge the pain. Trying to avoid feelings of sadness and loss only prolongs the grieving process. Unresolved grief can also lead to complications such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and health problems.
- ❖ *Express your feelings in a tangible or creative way.* - Write about your loss in a journal. If you've lost a loved one, write a letter saying the things you never got to say; make a scrapbook or photo album celebrating the person's life; or get involved in a cause or organization that was important to him or her.
- ❖ *Look after your physical health.* - The mind and body are connected. When you feel good physically, you'll also feel better emotionally. Combat stress and fatigue by getting enough sleep, eating right, and exercising. Don't use alcohol or drugs to numb the pain of grief or lift your mood artificially.
- ❖ *Don't let anyone tell you how to feel.* - and don't tell yourself how to feel either. Your grief is your own, and no one else can tell you when it's time to "move on" or "get over it." Let yourself feel whatever you feel without embarrassment or judgment. It's

okay to be angry, to yell at the heavens, to cry or not to cry. It's also okay to laugh, to find moments of joy, and to let go when you're ready.

- ❖ *Plan ahead for grief "triggers".* - Anniversaries, holidays, and milestones can reawaken memories and feelings. Be prepared for an emotional wallop, and know that it's completely normal. If you're sharing a holiday or lifecycle event with other relatives, talk to them ahead of time about their expectations and agree on strategies to honor the person you loved.

When grief doesn't go away.

It's normal to feel sad, numb, or angry following a loss. But as time passes, these emotions should become less intense as you accept the loss and start to move forward. If you aren't feeling better over time, or your grief is getting worse, it may be a sign that your grief has developed into a more serious problem, such as complicated grief.

Complicated grief

The sadness of losing someone you love never goes away completely, but it shouldn't remain centre stage. If the pain of the loss is so constant and severe that it keeps you from resuming your life, you may be suffering from a condition known as complicated grief. Complicated grief is like being stuck in an intense state of mourning. You may have trouble accepting the death long after it has occurred or be so preoccupied with the person who died that it disrupts your daily routine and undermines other relationships.

Symptoms of complicated grief include:

- ❖ Intense longing and yearning for the deceased
- ❖ Intrusive thoughts or images of your loved one
- ❖ Denial of the death or sense of disbelief
- ❖ Imagining that your loved one is alive
- ❖ Searching for the person in familiar places
- ❖ Avoiding things that remind you of your loved one
- ❖ Extreme anger or bitterness over the loss
- ❖ Feeling that life is empty or meaningless.

The thought at this time is that should one be stuck in complicated grief or in one of the stages mentioned earlier for a period of six months or longer it would be advisable to seek help from a qualified therapist or grief counsellor to assist you in overcoming this stage.

Personal Thoughts.

Consider this.

There is no greater loss than the loss suffered when we fail to find meaning in the initial loss experienced.

May I encourage you to find meaning in the loss experienced for grieving that is expressed and experienced has this potential to enrich our lives.

The journey of grief comes with many questions that may linger for a while to come. Many answers that may be found in this place of questioning often leads to other questions.

I believe that it our Lord's preferred intention to quiten our aching hearts with His love than to answer all our questions. For He himself is the answer.

Slowly as we move forward we find that some of those questions still remain, however it has become okay not to have the answer.

Some of our greatest victories are found in the midst of some of our greatest defeats.

Grief is a journey that all of us at some time or another need to go through in our lives, this is not a journey that we can go around or over but a journey that we go through.

Psalm 23:4

Yea, thou I walk *through* the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

Question to consider.

Is this the same rod and staff that comforted Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Humble submission and blind obedience.