



Living with Loss & Grief



Changi
General Hospital

SingHealth



Loss: A given in life

Dealing with loss is part and parcel of life. Loss can take various forms. It can include the ending of an important relationship through separation, divorce or death; the loss of a baby through abortion, stillbirth or miscarriage; the loss of health or limb and subsequent loss of independence; the loss of job, income, status, a particular role; the loss of a pet, dream or anything that means a lot to us.

In this brochure, you will find information about the feelings that people often experience after a loss; how people can get stuck in the grieving process, and the help that is available.

Grief: A normal reaction to loss

Grief is a normal and natural set of reactions that we often have in response to loss in our lives. Although there are similarities in our reactions to these different types of losses, the intensity of our reactions to the death of a loved one is often the most intense and prolonged. Thus, while we often cope quite well with minor losses, major losses such as the death of a loved one can affect our lives for years with feelings of helplessness, confusion and overwhelming sadness.

This brochure is especially for those who have lost someone to death. However, even if you are grieving for a loss due to other reasons (e.g., divorce or deterioration of health due to an illness), you are still likely to identify with many of the grief reactions mentioned.

Grieving: Reactions and stages

Grieving takes place after any kind of loss, but most powerfully after the death of a loved one. The grief we experience at the death of a loved one is the consequence of living and loving, and of our meaningful connections with this person. Grief is the emotional response that we have as we cope with the significance of this loss, begin to adjust to the changes in our lives, and make some sense and order out of the chaos that has resulted from this death.

There are many types of grief responses, and they vary from individual to individual, depending on, amongst other factors, our personality, history of losses, culture, upbringing and our relationship with the person who has died. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, nor is there a set pattern or period to the grieving process. Some people will openly express their emotions when they grieve, while others will prefer to keep their thoughts and emotions to themselves. Some people are able to move through the grieving process relatively quickly, while others will take a much longer time.

Grieving is not just one feeling but a whole succession of feelings which can take a while to get through and cannot be hurried. Although we are different individuals who are likely to grieve in different ways, the feelings that we experience after a loss can be very similar. Grieving may occur in arbitrary stages and different emotions may be experienced during the different stages of this process.

Grieving: A succession of feelings and phases

Numbness

In the few hours or days following the death of a close relative or friend, many people may feel shocked, stunned or numb, finding it hard to believe that the loss has actually happened. They may feel like this even if the death has been anticipated. They may notice physical reactions, such as trembling, nausea, difficulty breathing, muscle weakness, dry mouth, or difficulty sleeping and eating.

This sense of numbness may help the person get through all the important practical arrangements that have to be made, such as getting in touch with relatives and organising the funeral. However, this feeling of unreality may become a problem if it goes on for too long. Seeing the body of the dead person may be, for some, an important beginning in overcoming this feeling of unreality. For many people, the funeral or memorial service is an occasion when the reality of the loss really starts to sink in. It may be distressing to see the body or attend the funeral, but these are ways of saying goodbye. These things may seem too painful to go through immediately after the loss, but not doing so may lead to a sense of deep regret in future.



Yearning and anger

After the reality of the loss has gradually sunk in, this emotional numbness may disappear and be replaced by a dreadful sense of emptiness, agitation, pining or yearning for the dead person. There is a feeling of wanting, somehow, to find them, even though this is clearly impossible.

This will make it difficult for a person to relax, concentrate or sleep properly. People in grief may thus be absent-minded, forgetful or have strange dreams and nightmares. Some people feel that they 'see' or sense the presence of their departed loved one everywhere they go — in the street, the park, around the house, or anywhere they had spent time together. People in grief can feel very angry at this time — towards the doctors and nurses who did not prevent the death, towards friends and relatives who did not do enough, towards God or even towards the person who has left them.

Guilt

Another common feeling is guilt. People in grief may find themselves going over in their minds all the things they should have said or done (or not said or done). They may consider what they could have done differently that might have prevented the death. Death is usually beyond anyone's control and a bereaved person may need to be reminded of this. Guilt may also arise if a sense of relief is experienced when someone has died after a particularly prolonged and painful illness. This feeling of relief is natural, extremely understandable and very common.





Sadness and depression

Several weeks after the loss, people in grief may enter into periods of quiet sadness or depression, social withdrawal and silence. These sudden changes of emotion, which can be confusing to friends or relatives, are normal, and part of the different stages of grief.

These periods of sadness and depression can become more frequent and intense during the first four to six weeks. In fact, episodes of strong feelings of sadness can occur at any time, and be triggered by people, places or things that bring back memories of the deceased. Other people may find it difficult to understand, or be embarrassed when the bereaved person suddenly bursts into tears for no obvious reason. During such periods, it may also appear to other people that the bereaved person is spending a lot of time doing nothing constructive except looking preoccupied or lost in his or her own world, crying or wanting to talk about the deceased.

This is in fact a very important stage during which the bereaved person is mentally and emotionally processing the loss, thinking about the person he or she has lost, reliving the good and bad times they had spent together, as well as processing and integrating the various strong and often confusing emotions.

As time goes by

As time passes, the fierce pain of early bereavement begins to fade. The sadness lessens and it is possible for the person in grief to think about other things and even look forward to the future. However, the sense of having lost a loved one, and thus, a part of oneself, may never go away completely. Anniversary dates (e.g., wedding, the person's death) and special occasions (e.g., birthdays and festive seasons) may continue to trigger strong emotions in the bereaved person, even after many years.

Final phase of grieving

These various phases of grieving and their accompanying emotions often overlap, and may show themselves in different ways for different people. Many people recover from a major bereavement within one or two years, while others may take longer. Grief usually lasts as long as it takes the bereaved person to accept and learn to live with his or her loss.

The final phase of the grieving process is often a 'letting go' of the person who has died, and the start of a 'new life'. The sadness tends to occur less frequently, sleep and appetite become much better, and energy returns to normal. The person is able to return to his routine, such as the resumption of work and relationships, and eventually, enjoy life again.

It is important to remember that there is no standard way of grieving. All of us have our own ways of grieving. The goal of the person dealing with a loss is to move through the various 'stages' of loss; to process it factually and emotionally, learn from and appreciate the impact of the loss, and to achieve some sort of closure, so that life can be experienced more fully with integrity, insight and wisdom.





Grieving in children and adolescents

Even though children may not understand the meaning of death until they are three or four years old, they do feel very much the same way as adults. It is clear that even infants grieve and feel great distress when encountering a loss.

Children can have great difficulty grasping the finality of death, as they may see death as temporary and reversible, due to the belief reinforced by cartoon characters who seem to 'die' and 'come back to life again'. They may also have great difficulty dealing with the unfamiliar emotions associated with the death of a loved one. This may make them very confused, manifest symptoms of grief mentioned earlier, or show regressive or difficult behaviour (e.g. thumb-sucking, bedwetting, temper tantrums, misbehaving in school, or becoming very clingy and insecure). They may also fear that other loved ones, such as their siblings or parents, will die soon after.

Young people may not speak about their grief for fear of burdening the adults around them. The grief of children and adolescents, and their need for mourning, should not be overlooked when a member of the family has died.

Children and adolescents often look to important people in their lives to learn how to grieve. They are sensitive to the moods and behaviour of the adults around them, and will not share their thoughts and feelings of the loss unless these adults are willing to do so.

Children and adolescents are frightened by what they do not know or understand, so it is very important to explain what has happened simply and clearly, and to offer lots of support and reassurance. Encourage them, if they are ready, to verbalise their thoughts and feelings, and be ready for questions and demands for detail. Although you may find these questions painful, try to answer them as honestly as possible, avoiding vagueness and euphemisms. It may not be helpful to conceal your own sorrow from them (because it can send the wrong message that it is 'bad' to show emotions). On the other hand, it can be helpful to involve them in healing rituals, such as funerals.

How to help yourself

1. Allow yourself to grieve

There is no right or wrong way to think or feel about a loss. Allow your feelings and thoughts to be what they are, and do not be pressured by people's ideas of what you should or should not do, think or feel. Crying, talking, writing or doing physical activities are some helpful ways to express your grief.

2. Reach out to people you trust

This is the time to lean on friends, family, counsellors and other supportive people who can accept your thoughts and feelings without judgement or giving you unnecessary advice. Other people often want to help but do not know how. It may help to simply tell them what you need.

3. Accept your loss gradually to get through it

Some people try to ignore their loss and refuse to think about it or feel any strong emotion. They may feel that time itself will heal their pain but this is not necessarily true. Learn to accept loss as an inevitable part of your life and allow yourself to work through your grief.



4. Realise that the intense feelings are normal and expected

You may feel, during times of loss, that you are losing your mind and that you will never be the same again. Your anger, tears, guilt, loneliness and nightmares may be more pronounced than you have ever experienced before. Sometimes, you have not achieved closure on past losses, so another loss may mean having to deal with both the current and previous losses, making the intense emotions seem unbearable. If you allow yourself to process your loss productively, these strong feelings are likely to lessen with time.

5. Take care of your health

Grief can put a great deal of stress on your body. It is, therefore, very important for you to be kind to yourself and to take extra care to keep yourself healthy.

It is important for you to eat regularly and to keep to a healthy and balanced diet even if you are experiencing poor appetite.

Doing exercises or meditation may lessen the enormous stress of bereavement and the accompanying physical problems, as well as help to relieve anxiety and counter depression. Consider activities such as brisk walking, playing tennis, swimming, massage, spa treatment, yoga or tai chi.

Be gentle with yourself. Comfort yourself with little rewards or treats. Taking the time to have your hair done can be therapeutic. You can also buy yourself a nice present, read a feel-good novel, or watch an uplifting movie. If you like to set high standards for yourself, this is the time to lower them for the time being and to indulge yourself.

Avoid the use of alcohol and drugs to drown your sorrows. Although these chemicals may seem effective in numbing your pain in the short-term, they do not resolve but, instead, postpone and delay the effects of your grief.



6. Avoid unnecessary changes

The stress of grieving typically affects your power of judgement and concentration. Change causes stress and the last thing bereaved persons need is additional stress and sorrow when they are grieving. People in grief can try to get away from their grief by selling their house and starting afresh somewhere else, but they can end up burdening themselves with the extra stress of adjusting to a new life, and the regret of having made a hasty decision. It is thus important not to make major decisions during a crisis atmosphere and if possible, to postpone all decisions for the time being. Allow yourself time after a loss to consider your wants and needs carefully before making any major decisions, and preferably, only after you have consulted people whom you trust.



How can friends and relatives help?

Family and friends can help by spending time with the bereaved person. It is not so much words of comfort that are needed, but rather, the willingness to be with them during the time of their pain and distress.

When a loved one dies, the bereaved person usually wants to talk about the deceased and to mull over memories, repeatedly. Lending a sympathetic ear and willingness to listen carefully will be extremely helpful to the bereaved person at this time.



It is important that, if they so wish, bereaved persons are allowed to cry with somebody, and to talk about their feelings of pain and distress without being told to pull themselves together or to be strong for other people, or be offered a host of other platitudes (e.g., “you are such a strong person”, “it is God’s will”, “he or she is in a better place now where there is no pain”). Others may find it difficult to understand why the bereaved persons keep going over the same ground over and over again, but this is an important part of the grieving process and thus should be encouraged. If you do not know what to say, be honest and say so. This gives the bereaved persons a chance to tell you what they want.

Men, who are traditionally taught to bottle up their emotions, can react more angrily than women, who are more often able to express feelings of sorrow and confusion when facing a loss. Friends and relatives may be inclined to withdraw from bereaved people, especially men, who lash out verbally at others in response to their grief. When anger is expressed by the mourners, it helps for their supporters to remember that this emotion is normal. Supporters should not abandon the bereaved persons at this moment but instead continue to provide emotional support to them.

Festive occasions and anniversaries (not only of the death but also birthdays and weddings) are particularly painful times for the bereaved. Friends and relatives can make a special effort to be around during these times.

Practical help with cleaning, running errands, shopping or looking after children can ease the mourner’s burden of having to cope on his or her own. Elderly bereaved partners may need help with the chores that their deceased partners used to handle — paying bills, cooking, housework, getting the car serviced and so on.

It is important to allow bereaved people enough time to grieve. Some can seem to get over the loss quickly but others may take much longer. So do not expect too much too soon from bereaved relatives or friends — they need the time to grieve properly and your role is to be there for them when they need you.

Unresolved grief

There are people who hardly seem to grieve at all. They do not cry at funerals, avoid any mention of their loss and return to their normal routine quickly. For some, this is their normal way of dealing with their loss. For others, they may suffer from strange physical symptoms or repeated spells of depression over the following years.



Some individuals may not have the opportunity to grieve properly. The heavy demands of looking after a family or business just overwhelms them, and they do not have the luxury or time to come to terms with their loss.

Sometimes, the problem is that the loss is not seen as requiring a ‘proper’ grieving. This is not uncommon to those who have had a miscarriage or stillbirth, or even an abortion. Frequent bouts of depression may follow.

Some people may start to grieve and get stuck in their grieving. The early sense of shock and disbelief just goes on and on. Years may pass and the griever will still find it hard to believe that the person he or she loves, is actually dead. Others may carry on being unable to think of anything else, sometimes to the extent of converting the bedroom of the dead into a kind of shrine to his or her memory.

Occasionally, the depression that occurs with subsequent bereavements may deepen to the extent that food and drink are refused and thoughts of suicide arise.

Although people with 'normal' grief may also experience the symptoms similar to those of unresolved (or complicated) grief, the reactions in 'normal' grief do not interfere with life as much or for as long. By contrast, people with unresolved grief often:

- (a) Seem unable to move through the stages of grief even after an extended period of time
- (b) Experience prolonged or recurrent physical or psychological symptoms, such as depression, anger, loss of appetite, insomnia, fatigue, agitation, listlessness, loss of interest, or difficulty concentrating
- (c) Express unreasonable or chronic guilt or thoughts of suicide

Seeking professional help

Occasionally, sleepless nights can go on for so long that it becomes a serious problem. Your doctor may prescribe you with a few days' medication to help you to sleep.

If the depression continues to deepen, affecting your appetite, energy, sleep or daily functioning, antidepressants may be necessary. These medications are not addictive. If the depression still does not improve, it may be necessary for you to see a mental health professional (e.g., psychiatrist) for further help.



Bereavement turns our world upside down and is one of the most painful experiences that we will have to endure. It can be strange, terrible and overwhelming. Despite this, it is a part of life that we all have to go through and, usually, does not require professional intervention. However, for those of us who run into problems (e.g., unresolved grief), do know that help is readily available.

Notes



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