

UNDERSTANDING GRIEF AND LOSS

- HARVARD HEALTH -

NORMAL GRIEF REACTIONS

Sooner or later everyone will grieve the loss of a close relative or friend, whether the cause is a sudden heart attack, car accident, or the more prolonged physical ravages of disease or old age. Each year more than 2 million people die in the United States, leaving behind many others who loved them and mourn them.

When people talk about grieving, they often describe an experience akin to being at sea. Wave after wave of emotion envelops them, and just when they think they're recovering, a new wave hits them. Yet with time, most people manage to reach equilibrium. While significant losses are never forgotten, the feelings of grief become less intense and more manageable. However, people often experience fluctuating emotions for months.

The following experiences are all part of the normal process of grieving and can last from 6 - 12 months.

- **Yearning.** Survivors repeatedly want to reunite with the person who died in some way, and may even want to die in order to be with their loved one.
- **Sadness.** People often experience waves of deep sadness and regret about the loved one. Crying and even sobbing jags are normal.
- **Anger, remorse, and guilt.** It is not uncommon to experience negative emotions while grieving.
- **Vivid memories.** It's normal to think of the deceased often and recall vivid memories of times together. Images of the deceased - or even the sound of a loved one's voice - may emerge without warning.
- **Somatic disturbances.** Grief may affect people physically as well as mentally. Some people may have sleep problems, changes in appetite, digestive difficulties, dry mouth, or fatigue after a loss. Occasional bouts of restlessness and agitation are also common.
- **Disbelief.** It takes people a long time to truly accept that a loved one has died. People often forget at times that a loved one is gone—until some reminder brings the reality searing back.
- **Apathy.** It's typical for people to withdraw or disengage at times while grieving. They may become irritable toward others.
- **Emotional surges.** Although some of the worst emotions and disturbances ebb with time, the grieving process also involves surges of emotions. Holidays, anniversaries, birthdays, and other significant events can trigger bouts of grief.

FACTORS THAT MAKE GRIEVING HARDER

As if the normal process of grief were not challenging enough, the following events or factors may make it even harder. In some people, these factors can cause grief to become complicated and prolonged.

- **Conflict in relationships.** People who had an ambivalent, angry, conflicted, or highly dependent relationship with the deceased may find it hard to grieve.
- **Multiple deaths.** If the loss occurs in conjunction with deaths of other loved ones, the grieving process can become magnified.
- **Mental illness.** People who already have depression, anxiety, or another mental illness may have an amplified response to a loss and experience a more intense bereavement.
- **Traumatic death.** A death that was unexpected, untimely, traumatic, or violent sets the stage for a more difficult grieving process.
- **Providing Care.** People who provided care to their loved ones before they died are likely to feel the loss more acutely than others, in part because they structured so much of their time to be with their loved ones. They may be haunted by images from the final days. In other cases, they may be at a loss to know how to spend their time.

- **Social isolation.** People who have few friends, family members, or other sources of social support may feel abandoned as they navigate the grieving process. Elderly people who outlive their spouses and friends, for example, may suffer more because they are suffering relatively alone.

BEYOND THE FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF

Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross developed a frequently cited model of bereavement in her landmark book "On Death and Dying." She described a linear five-step process consisting of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance as terminally ill patients became aware of their impending death. This work helped to legitimize a wide variety of emotions in people who are dying. The five-stage theory was later altered and adapted to cover the reaction to other losses, such as divorce or the death of a loved one.

A number of alternative models of bereavement have been proposed by others who view the bereavement process as non-linear, as one that varies from one person to the next. For example, Parkes (2009) has proposed that people who have experienced a serious loss undergo several prolonged and overlapping phases - numb disbelief, yearning for the deceased, disorganization and despair, and finally reorganization - during which they reestablish their life. The road to this new life may be long, as many must go through a difficult period of searching for what has been lost before they can release their attachment to the person who died and move forward. When enmeshed in disorganization and despair, people find themselves repeatedly going over the events preceding the death as if to set them right.

An alternate model of grieving includes certain tasks that people must accomplish (Worden, 2008). The first three tasks are to accept the loss, to experience the resulting pain, and to put the loss in some perspective and adjust to a changed world without the person who has died. The fourth and final task is for people to learn how to let go and be able to reach out and invest their love and energy in others. People may shuttle back and forth among these tasks. Dr. Worden suggests that leaving some of the tasks undone is like healing only partially from a wound.

Some writers combine elements of several grief models, noting that early in grieving, the emphasis is on "loss-oriented coping:" such as focusing on the person who died, the circumstances of the death, and painful feelings like yearning and despair. Later, people invest more in "restoration-oriented coping:" focusing on managing practical issues that arise, such as loneliness or challenging new circumstances. Rather than grieving continually, people seek occasional periods of respite. Time away from grief might take the form of a weekend with friends or a day of social activities.

A NEW WAY OF GRIEVING

Most recently, two psychologists make the case that advances in diagnosis and treatment—which have enabled people to live longer with life-threatening illnesses, such as cancers and heart disease—have significantly changed the grieving process.

In "Saying Goodbye: How Families Can Find Renewal Through Loss," the authors identify a pattern of grief commonly encountered by families who face the loss of a loved one to protracted illness. The book includes the following stages, which begin long before a person actually dies.

- **Crisis.** Family life is disrupted by the diagnosis. People are upset, saddened, and anxious. Other, unexpected feelings—resentment, anger, or guilt—may also emerge but often go unexpressed in the interest of rallying around the patient.
- **Unity.** The patient's needs are paramount. Activities include managing medical treatment, lining up social and support services, gathering insurance and other information, and attending to legal matters such as wills.
- **Upheaval.** The patient may be in remission or doing relatively well. But for others, unity and patience may have worn thin as protracted illness buffets their lives, relationships, and routines. At this stage, it's important—though often difficult—for family members to communicate honestly about the upheaval they're experiencing.
- **Resolution.** As the patient's health deteriorates, everyone comes to accept that the end is near. Decisions about

- **Renewal.** This final stage begins with the funeral and continues for a long time, as individuals adjust to the loss and to their changed roles.

NAVIGATING THE PROCESS

Every person—and every family—grieves differently. Some people may feel anxious, or others worry on their behalf, if they don't follow a particular path. However, grief is not a tidy, orderly process, and there is no single "right" way to grieve. It is normal for emotions to collide and overlap. Each person grieves uniquely, taking as much time as necessary, finding a meaningful way to come to terms with a loss.

A GUIDE TO GETTING THROUGH GRIEF

Losing a close friend or family member can be devastating. All the small details of daily life - getting out of bed, making meals, going to appointments, taking care of children, handling responsibilities at work - may seem extremely hard or inconsequential. It is important for people to let the nonessentials slide and to focus instead on ways to get through this difficult time.

Dr. Michael Hirsch, editor of Harvard Medical School's Special Health Report "Coping with Grief and Loss: A Guide to Healing," offers the following advice for those who are grieving:

LOOK AFTER THE ESSENTIALS

People who are grieving a loved one's loss may neglect their own health and well-being. In spite of the emotional pain, it's important to attend to the basics to maintain one's physical health.

- **Eat well.** A well-balanced diet is essential as you withstand the stress of grieving. That means eating plenty of vegetables, fruits, and complete proteins, and drinking plenty of water and other healthy liquids. If your appetite is diminished, try eating small portions more frequently. A daily multivitamin can help compensate for missing nutrients.
- **Take necessary medications.** Grief makes people more vulnerable to illness, so it's important that you keep taking any regular medications you have been taking.
- **Get enough sleep.** Grief is exhausting. If you feel tired, nap to make up for a sleep deficit. Paradoxically, doing more exercise is likely to improve your energy. Reduce your caffeine and alcohol intake, as these substances can interfere with sleep.
- **Exercise every day.** A simple walk, a bike ride, yoga, or a good workout can ease agitation, anger, and depression. Depending on your needs, exercise can provide you with a distraction when you need a break from grieving, or offer you some quiet time to focus on your loss.
- **Avoid risky behavior.** In the wake of a profound loss, people often justify using dangerous coping strategies—such as drinking too much alcohol (more than one drink a day for women or two for men), using drugs, or engaging in impulsive or self-destructive behavior. The short-term relief of pain is not likely to be worth it if the pattern of dangerous behavior persists or intensifies, leading to further losses.
- **Delay big decisions.** . Grief can cloud thought processes, and people who make abrupt decision may regret them later. Many experts suggest that you wait a year, if possible, before moving, changing jobs, clearing out keepsakes, and making other momentous decisions.
- **Practice self-care.** People who are grieving should regularly ask, "What would help me most today?" The answer may vary from day to day and even from hour to hour. Sometimes you need to cry or talk to a friend, or just take a break from grieving.

REACH OUT TO FAMILY AND FRIENDS

In "Healing Your Grieving Heart," Wolfelt (2001) suggests that people who are grieving identify three friends or family members who can provide support on a regular basis in the first weeks and months after a loss. Perhaps they have practical help to offer or are not judgmental and are willing to listen. The following tips may also be helpful.

- ***Tell people what helps.*** People who are grieving may need to say, "I just need to cry right now," or "There's nothing you can do to fix this." It would help if you just stay with me for an hour." If you want to talk about the person you've lost, you may need to let others know. For example, it might help if you say, "I miss her so much. I just want to talk about her, but I feel like everyone is afraid to say her name."
- ***Embrace mixed feelings.*** It is entirely normal to have mixed emotions about the loss and about your loved one. It helps to express these so that other people understand what you are going through. Some things you might say are:
 - "I feel so angry about his death. It seems so useless:"
 - "I'm relieved that Mom isn't suffering anymore, but I miss her terribly:"
 - "My relationship with my father was really difficult. I'm feeling a lot of things right now"
 - "I know you think I should be over this, but I'm not."
- ***Take away uncertainty.*** Often, people aren't sure how to act around you when you are grieving. Although it may be difficult for you to express what you need while you are grieving a loss, the following directions might help others understand how they can support you:
 - "If you really want to help, clearing up the kitchen or vacuuming would be great:"
 - "Hugs just make me feel worse right now. What I need is a little time alone:"
 - "I can't be alone tonight, but I don't want to talk. Could you stay and just watch TV with me?"
 - "I feel so mad about everything. I'm irritated with people all the time."
- ***Find others who understand.*** People who have also lost a loved one may be more understanding. Ask them outright: "What helped you? How did you get through this awful time?" When friends and family can't help in these ways, support groups often can.
- ***Leave the door open.*** People who are grieving sometimes may wish that everyone else would just go away and leave them alone to sort through their feelings. If you express this need too forcefully, though, you may drive people so far away that they are not going to be there when you do need them. Here are some ways of expressing the need for solitude while leaving the door open to future support:
 - "I just want to go home and go to bed right now. Would you call me tomorrow, though?"
 - "I feel so upset these days, I can't settle on anything. Please don't take it personally."
 - "I'm just not up to that right now; maybe in a few weeks I will be."
- ***Realize that everyone grieves differently.*** People who experience the same loss often grieve in different ways. For example, one parent who loses a child may need to cry and cry frequently, while the other parent might work incessantly and act increasingly distant. Both are trying desperately to deal with their pain and loss. Professional insight from a grief counselor can be valuable when grieving drives a wedge between you and your spouse, family members, or other loved ones.

COMMEMORATING A LOVED ONE

Remembering and honoring the person who died helps people keep memories alive. Sometimes it helps to shape meaning from loss. You can commemorate a loved one in various ways.

- ***Artwork.*** Creating art can help you explore your feelings, chronicle the life of the person who died, or express your ideas of an afterlife. For example, you can create a memory quilt incorporating meaningful scenes and fabrics. Children struggling with grief may find creating art - whether it's with clay, colored pens, paints, or collage supplies - particularly helpful.
- ***Journal.*** Some people create a journal to memorialize a loved one's life. You can also develop a timeline of important dates and events. The journal can include picture stories, sayings, and well-loved recipes. Friends and family may want to contribute as well.

- **Memory box.** You can use pictures, objects, and art supplies to make a memory box for display or keepsakes. When you are ready to go through your loved one's belongings, you can set aside items for the memory box.
- **Slide show.** You can use favorite pictures, songs, and sayings to create a poignant multimedia remembrance of your loved one's life. Or splice old videos together and copy them onto DVDs for others to enjoy.
- **Photo wall.** You can create a collage or remembrance wall from photos taken at different times and events.
- **Good cause.** Sometimes people leave instructions about how they want to be remembered through memorial gifts to various causes, such as medical research, peace efforts, and scholarship funds. If not, you can think about how best to honor your loved one.
- **Peaceful spot.** A peaceful nook with a comfortable chair, lighting, photos, inspirational books, or other important objects can serve as a spot to honor your loved one. Some people create serene outdoor spots, such as a fountain in a garden. Or you could walk regularly through a nature preserve, or visit a spot your loved one enjoyed.
- **Garden.** Planting a garden or a tree can be a wonderful way to remember someone.
- **Gravesite.** In many cultures, the gravesite is a focal point for commemorating the loved one, particularly on special days such as birthdays, anniversaries, or holy days. You can plant flowers there, say a prayer, or simply visit for a few moments of contemplation.
- **Prayer.** Spirituality is of great comfort to many. Depending on your own views, spiritual practices can include saying prayers, lighting incense or a candle, creating a shrine, or meditating.
- **Echo.** You can create an "echo" of your loved one, by doing something silly, pleasurable, or solemn that they once did. This might involve giving a holiday toast, traveling, playing well-loved music, or performing acts of kindness.

RECOGNIZING AND COPING WITH COMPLICATED GRIEF

Sometimes grief can be so intense and long-lasting that it may resemble a more serious disorder. As many as fifty percent of widows and widowers, for example, develop symptoms typical of major depression in the first few months after a spouse dies. They may also have hallucinatory experiences - imagining that the dead are still alive, feeling their presence, hearing them call out.

These symptoms, upsetting as they may be, are usually normal responses to a profound loss. In most people, the symptoms ease over time. One review noted that 15% of people who are grieving still feel depressed one year after a loss; by two years, the number falls to 7%.

But if the symptoms are intense enough to interfere with relationships, work, school, and other areas of life, the problem may be complicated grief - a term that describes a grieving process that is particularly difficult. It is also known as protracted or chronic grief, and it combines features of both depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) - which is why some professionals call it traumatic grief.

RISK FACTORS

Complicated grief is more likely to occur after a death that is traumatic - premature, violent, or unexpected. But in some people, even normal bereavement can produce complicated grief.

Whether that happens or not depends on how a person copes, not just with trauma, but with loss. Everyone experiences unfulfilled hopes, broken romances, illness, and injury. For anyone who could not respond to earlier losses without losing emotional equilibrium, complicated grief becomes a greater danger. So a person with a history of depression, anxiety, or some other disorder is more likely to suffer complicated grief after bereavement, as well as PTSD if the loss was traumatic.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

While it is hardly necessary for everyone who is grieving to seek professional help, people who develop complicated grief may need treatment. Other reasons to seek professional help include drug abuse, increased use of alcohol or tobacco, gaining or losing a significant amount of weight, experiencing uncontrollable anxiety, and failing to feel somewhat better after a year has passed.

Psychotherapy can help people to identify incompletely mourned losses of the past and draw connections to the present loss. Several options exist, and a recent review concluded that all were effective - to varying degrees - at improving symptoms and diminishing the level of complicated grief.

Interpersonal therapy, for example, explores the patient's relationship with the deceased person, emphasizing disputes, role transitions, and grief. Cognitive behavioral therapy can provide people with tools to work through aspects of grief and help people learn to think differently about the loss.

A more intensive therapy known as complicated grief treatment or traumatic grief therapy includes both interpersonal and cognitive behavioral approaches to mitigate the effects of trauma and relieve stress. The therapist provides information about the grieving process, along with an explanation of a "dual process" in which patients concentrate on both mourning (adjusting to the loss) and improved functioning (restoring a satisfying life). The therapy includes exercises that help mourners to confront situations and people they have been avoiding. They are also asked to retell the story of the death, to relate memories of the deceased, and to hold imaginary conversations with him or her. (The therapist asks the bereaved to take both sides in these conversations.) To help restore some joy to their lives, mourners are encouraged to think about what they would want for themselves if their grief were not so overpowering.

This technique can be overly taxing, causing some patients to leave prematurely. But for those who can tolerate it, it may have advantages. In one study, 51% of people who underwent treatment for complicated grief improved afterward, compared with 28% for standard interpersonal therapy. The results also showed that complicated grief treatment was especially effective for people who were mourning a violent death.

These successes are promising, but it is unclear whether the treatment would yield the same results if performed by the average therapist rather than by therapists working in specialized research settings. Nonetheless, the research suggests that there are a variety of helpful options.

ANNIVERSARIES, HOLIDAYS AND OTHER DIFFICULT TIMES

Holidays, anniversaries, birthdays, and events that would otherwise be joyful can be especially hard on people who are grieving. If the loss is fresh, holiday cheer can seem like an affront. Celebrations may underscore how alone people may feel after the death of a loved one. Similarly, it's hard to predict how one will feel on the deceased's birthday, an anniversary or on the date of death. The following strategies may help people to ease the pain around holidays and other difficult times.

- ***Start a new tradition.*** People can remember the deceased on special occasions by placing a lighted candle on the table, leaving an empty chair, or saying a few words of remembrance. If the person who died always played a special role in festivities, another family member may be able to fill the role.
- ***Change the celebration.*** Sometimes people opt for a simpler celebration. They go out to dinner instead of planning an elaborate meal at home. Or they schedule a trip or an outing with family members or friends.
- ***Ask for advice.*** It may help some people to talk to others who have lost people close to them to find out how they manage holidays.
- ***Express personal needs.*** People who are grieving may find it hard to participate in all the festivities or may need to let go of overwhelming or unsatisfying traditions. It's all right to tell people you're just not up to it right now or to change plans at the last minute. Don't feel pressured to do more than you want to do. Leave an event when you wish to go.
- ***Plan to mark the day.*** Others find it helpful to make special plans for an anniversary, birthday, or other special day. This can include walking through a nature preserve, visiting the cemetery or the place

- *Help someone else.* It may also help to volunteer through a charitable or religious organization. Make a donation to a favorite cause in memory of the person who died.

Resources

- **HEALING YOUR GRIEVING HEART: 100 PRACTICAL IDEAS**
Alan Wolfelt (Companion Press, 2001)
- **SAYING GOODBYE: HOW FAMILIES CAN FIND RENEWAL THROUGH LOSS**
Barbara Okun, Ph.D., and Joseph Nowinski, Ph.D. (Berkley Books, 2011)
- **SEVEN CHOICES: FINDING DAYLIGHT AFTER LOSS SHATTERS YOUR WORLD**
Elizabeth Harper Neeld (Warner Books, 2003)
- **HEALING AFTER LOSS: DAILY MEDITATIONS FOR WORKING THROUGH GRIEF**
Martha W. Hickman (William Morrow, 1994)
- **THE GRIEF RECOVERY HANDBOOK; 20th Anniversary Expanded Edition**
The Action Program for Moving Beyond Death, Divorce, and Other Losses
John W. James and Russell Friedman (Harper Perennial, 2009)
- **I WASN'T READY TO SAY GOODBYE: Surviving, Coping and Healing After the Sudden Death of a Loved One** by Brook Noel and Pamela Blair, Ph.D. (Champion Press Ltd., 2008)
- **GRIEF AND LOSS: Theories and Skills for Helping Professionals**
Katherine Walsh-Burke (Allyn & Bacon, 2005)
- **GRIEF COUNSELING AND GRIEF THERAPY: A Handbook for the Mental Health Professional, 4th Edition**, by J. William Worden, Ph.D. (Springer Publishing, 2008)
- **COUNSELING STRATEGIES FOR LOSS AND GRIEF**
Keren M. Humphrey (American Counseling Association, 2009)
- **CREATIVE INTERVENTIONS FOR BEREAVED CHILDREN**
Liana Lowenstein, M.S.W. (Champion Press, 2006)
- **I WISH I COULD HOLD YOUR HAND...A CHILD' GUIDE TO GRIEF AND LOSS**
Pat Palmer, Ed.D. (Impact Publishers, 2000)
- **THE GRIEVING GARDEN: Living with the Death of a Child**
Suzanne Redfern and Susan K. Gilbert (Hampton Roads Publishing, 2008)
- **WHEN THERE ARE NO WORDS: Finding Your Way to Cope with Loss and Grief**
Charlie Walton (Pathfinder Publishing, 1999)
- **HOW TO GO ON LIVING WHEN SOMEONE YOU LOVE DIES**
Therese A. Rando, Ph.D. (Bantam, 1991)
- **HELPING GRIEVING PEOPLE - WHEN TEARS ARE NOT ENOUGH:**
A Handbook for Care Providers (2nd Edition)
J. Shep Jeffreys, Ed.D. (Routledge, 2011)
- **BEREAVEMENT: Studies of Grief in Adult Life (4th Edition)**
Colin Murray Parkes and Holly G. Prigerson, (Routledge, 2009)