

EXPERIENCE OF GRIEF

Grief is the normal reaction to a loss. In varying intensities we experience grief throughout our lives, though few of us realize that what we are feeling is grief. It is believed that even as newborn babies we experience grief at the separation from our mothers and the security of the womb. Throughout our lives we experience loss and its subsequent grief. Mother leaves us for awhile and we grieve. We lose or break a toy, we grieve. A pet dies. A friend moves away. We break up with a girl friend. We go off to college. We lose a job. The list of losses in our lives is endless, but we do not recognize we are grieving because we don't define what we are feeling as grief.

We grieve a little or a lot depending on our need for who or what is lost. It is important to know what is normal. The following is a general description of the experience of grief. Remember, our commonness is great, but so is our diversity. Accept that as being true. Accept that while you will react as others do in many ways, you will not react as they do in as many other ways. Relate to another, but do not compare yourself to another. See yourself as the unique individual that you are. Know that how you reacting is normal FOR YOU.

DENIAL Initially, when you were told your loved one was dead you denied it. Probably your first words were, "Oh, No!". Denial is a universal reaction to something that is too horrible to face. It is normal and protective. Denial can last for months or minutes. Only when denial is held on to indefinitely can it be hurtful to your recovery . . .

SHOCK AND NUMBNESS accompany denial. The thought that your love is dead is difficult to face. It's as though your mind says, "This is too much to face at one time so I'll turn that reality off for awhile." In shock we react in different ways. Some of us mentally pull away from what has happened; behaving in robot-like fashion, doing what we are told, but totally withdrawn from

everything going on around us. Some are totally disabled and can do little more than attend the wake and funeral. The majority of us react with some combination of these reactions.

A length of time can't be put on shock. Shock may last for weeks after the wake and funeral. Usually there is a slow realization that only comes with the day to day painful reminders that our loved one is dead. When shock is gone and full realization sets in, the intense pain begins.

When this happens the real manifestations of grief begin with a vengeance. You may find that you don't eat at all or eat constantly, depending on how you use food as a coping mechanism. You may be obsessed with thoughts of your love and will want to talk about her constantly, or retell the details of her death over and over again. You may cry almost incessantly, even wailing at times. You may have trouble concentrating. Your mind may seem to be a jumble of disconnected thoughts and to perform even simple, ordinary tasks can become almost impossible. Weakness may overcome you. You may have little energy for anything. You may have physical pains in various places in your body. You may be extremely sensitive to noises or people or situations around you. You may experience extreme guilt or anger. You may feel helpless and hopeless.

It's important to know that whatever reactions you experience, or how intensely you experience them, is normal and will vary in intensity from one time to another. Let us discuss some of the more common symptoms separately, and ways some of us have found to cope with them.

SLEEP PROBLEMS The majority of bereaved people find sleep difficult for months. Warm milk or a bath before bed, reading or using relaxation techniques are somewhat helpful. Keeping a notebook by the bed to write out feelings and thoughts when you can't sleep can help lessen the intense feelings you have, especially at a time when you have no one to talk to. It's important not to become aggravated when you can't get to sleep. This decreases the likelihood that you will fall asleep. Try to accept the fact that sleeplessness is normal and temporary, and that the rest you get by lying down

can be almost as helpful as sleep. The use of drugs or alcohol to induce sleep is dangerous. Neither produces normal sleep and both can be habit forming.

APPETITE CHANGE Changes in eating patterns are common. Hurting persons are seldom concerned with nutrition or a balanced diet. Some grievors eat almost nothing, while others eat constantly. A weight gain or loss of ten pounds is normal. Proper nutrition is important. The quantity of food is not, but the quality is. Include something from the four food groups (milk, meat, fruit-vegetable, grain) in each meal. Water is extremely important. Drink at least eight medium size glasses of water each day. Avoid caffeine and alcohol.

CONSTANT NEED TO THINK ABOUT YOUR LOVED ONE Frequently those around you will tell you to keep busy so you won't think about "it." This is ridiculous. Your loved one is in your thoughts every waking moment. You fall asleep thinking of her and she is the first thought you have when you awake. Sometimes you even dream about her. There is no way you can avoid thinking of your love even if you wanted to. This manifestation is likely to continue for many months. Eventually it will lessen, but at a very slow rate. In time you may notice that occasionally, and for a very brief period, something else will replace thoughts of her. As you begin to heal further, thoughts of other people and other things will again take their proper place in your mind.

CONSTANT NEED TO TALK ABOUT YOUR LOVED ONE This is closely related to constantly thinking of your love. You need to hear yourself say, out loud, what you are thinking. It helps to see the reality of your love's death, and to look rationally at what you are thinking. This need to talk about your love may be one of the harder ones to meet. We may have trouble finding someone to listen to you. We can talk more than one person can listen. Family and friends may tire of hearing you say the same things over and over again, Explain to them how necessary it is for you to talk and ask them to be patient with the repeated stories of your love. Talking with another bereaved person who understands your needs is the most helpful. Some bereaved people without an outlet for talking have reported talking to anyone who will listen, even to total strangers. Some find that talking into a tape recorder helps. Some talk out loud to themselves. Others find it helpful to write about or to their loved one. However you do it, it is extremely

important to find an outlet for talking, as it is a necessary part of grief work.

CRYING Early in your grief you seem to do nothing but cry. Red, swollen eyes and a handkerchief rolled up in your hand seems to be a part of you. The death of a loved one can cause extreme mental and emotional stress. Health problems, such as ulcers, high blood pressure and even some types of allergies can be caused by this stress. The more of it we can release through crying the healthier we will be, both physically and emotionally.

This is especially true of men who have been taught that "big boys" don't cry. If you are a man, try to find a place to cry that is acceptable to you. Crying with another member of the family helps. Some men find they can only cry alone in their cars, or at a park or even at the cemetery.

I have heard bereaved people say "If I ever let myself go and cry I will never stop." Yes you will. Crying is self-terminating. It takes energy to cry, and when you use up that energy the crying will stop. Remember too, that if you don't release that energy in some way, it has no place to go, and this unspent energy will build in you as if in a pressure cooker. If you expend some of this energy by crying when you feel the need, you can lessen it. If you will notice, you usually feel exhausted after a session of hard crying. That is because you have expended so much energy.

THE INABILITY TO CONCENTRATE Almost all bereaved people experience the inability to concentrate to some extent and for varying lengths of time. It has been described by some as a feeling of being constantly confused. Others describe it as a slowing down of their thinking process. Some people report feeling confused for many months. Some experienced little confusion and others felt confused only under certain circumstances.

Bereaved people cope with the inability to concentrate in different ways. Some simply muddle through everything they have to do and feel constantly frustrated by the inability to think straight. Some write themselves detailed instructions to follow or reminder notes in order to do what they have to do. Others eliminate as many of the jobs as they can or enlist the aid of others. Some say that when they were able to accept this reaction as normal and temporary, they seemed to be less bothered by it. Struggling to concentrate or being upset by the inability to think properly only makes it worse.

PHYSICAL PROBLEMS Physical problems such as weakness, fatigue, stomach problems, increased blood pressure, headaches, are all

common to the bereaved. Certainly our emotional stress may be the main cause, but we should be aware that there could be real physical causes. Check with your doctor, but be sure he knows you are grieving over the death of your loved one.

A word of caution about medication. Unfortunately, many doctors view grief as pathological; as "sick", and will prescribe drugs that will suppress your emotions. Grief is not an illness, nor is it abnormal. If you suppress the normal, albeit extremely painful, manifestations of grief you will likely prolong and/or distort your grief. In addition, the use of mind altering chemicals can cause you to become dependent on them. Hopefully, your doctor can prescribe medication that will alleviate the symptoms of your physical problems, but be extremely careful of allowing him to alleviate the stress of your grief with mind or mood altering chemicals.

SENSITIVITY TO OUTSIDE STIMULI Simply put, sensitivity to outside stimuli means that you may be acutely aware of every noise and every activity around you. Some people describe it as being "very nervous". It seems that every noise is too loud, or everything someone says is the "wrong thing". Nothing others do pleases you. The normal bickering that goes on in your household may seem like violent arguments. A hurrying neighbor's small slight feels like total rejection. Your reactions to activities going on around you can be completely out of proportion. We overreact to everyone and every situation.

For months after Arthur was killed I moved back and forth between screaming temper tantrums at the slightest provocation of my surviving children, to extreme feelings of guilt for yelling at them or punishing them. Another mother lost all her neighborhood friendships because she was convinced the neighbors were not letting their children play with hers. She felt the other mothers didn't want their children playing with her children because her child had died, when in reality, they had decided as a group to keep their children at home to keep from bothering the grieving mother.

Many of us feel we have an aura or a force around us, or as if we wear a sign on our foreheads that says "bereaved person". We feel different from others, and feel that they treat us differently. It is possible that people do treat us differently, but it may also be only our perception.

Be aware that you ARE overly sensitive. Stop and ask yourself if you are reacting appropriately or not. Discuss the situation with an unbiased person or another bereaved person. The pain of

your grief is deep enough without allowing yourself to be hurt when hurt isn't intended.

In summary, it is important to recognize that because each of us is different as individuals, we will be different in how we react in our grief. We must not compare ourselves to others or tell ourselves that something is wrong with us if we have not experienced certain of the listed manifestations, or if we have not experienced them with the same intensity or frequency that others have. There are many factors in our lives and in our personalities that cause us to grieve in our own unique way.

Usually we will grieve in much the same way we have reacted to past crises in our lives. An example of this is the individual who "goes to pieces" when they have a broken leg or some other minor injury. That person will likely "go to pieces" in her grief. Another individual who faces crises stoically is likely to react in her grief the same way. If we have handled past crises by frantic activity or concentrating on other things and only minimally dealing with that crisis, we are likely to face our loved one's death that same way. If we have been brought up to "be strong", to "not cry", to "control your emotions", we will likely grieve this way. Even if we take the advice given here and allow ourselves to express our emotions, we will not express them to the extent that another person will who normally expresses their emotions easily. It won't be easy to change past coping mechanisms.

I was raised with the idea that I was not to show emotion; that it wasn't "lady like". No matter how I try to express emotion in front of others, it still is hard for me. My head has learned differently, but my conditioning is still too strong to allow me to change easily.

It is not important how we express our emotions, but that we do. Grief must be gone through, not around. We cannot avoid grief or bury it. We must allow ourselves to express, in our own way, all the emotions that we feel in order to work towards resolving our grief.

Our sadness must be expressed through our tears. Our anger and our guilt must be dealt with by looking at what or whom we are angry with or feel guilty about. We must face the reality that our child is dead and will never again be with us. We must allow ourselves to be miserable when we need to be.

People who don't work through their grief, create other problems for themselves. One woman whose spouse died a number of years ago says she tells me she must not think about that sad part of her life. She is an alcoholic. A

father whose son died a number of years ago insists he only remembers happy things about the few short years of his son's life. Three years after his son died he had a heart attack. A widower who refused to look at his emotions when his wife died is a bitter and angry man who finds no joy in life.

There are many people who have lost a significant other many years in the past who have not worked through their grief. Today many of them have physical or psychological ailments that have been caused by the stress of unresolved grief. If you allow yourself to go through your grief and allow yourself to experience and express your emotions, you will arrive at the end of the tunnel of your grief sooner. You can experience joy in your life again. If you burrow through the mire of deep grief, you can emerge on the other side with a deeper appreciation of life, and with fond memories of your love forever.

The choice is yours. You can suffer harder and deeper for a shorter time, or try to bury your grief and let it become a festering wound that will plague you until you die.

But, be aware that if you face your emotions and allow yourself to actively grieve, it is possible that family and friends might accuse you of "giving in" to your grief. Well, that is exactly what you are doing. They may not understand that what you are doing will help you to heal, but remind yourself that it is your grief and your pain. Don't let yourself be controlled by what others say.

It is important to know that you won't always feel the pain you feel today. You will someday feel better. Hang on to that thought.

Not only do we all grieve differently, but we grieve for different lengths of time. No one can tell you how long you will experience a certain aspect of your grief. Be patient with yourself. Take your own time. Allow yourself to feel and express your thoughts and emotions and you will move out of that place much sooner. Fighting grief delays grief.

If, as you allow yourself to experience your grief, you question whether you are remaining in one place in your grief too long, talk with another bereaved person. Most of all, going through your grief by your own time table and according to your own judgment, is the most important way to recovery and reinvestment of your life without your loved one.

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