



GRIEF: THE REACTION TO LOSS

Grief...

... is a natural reaction to loss.

...produces physical and emotional responses.

...is the most universal and powerful of all human experiences.

No two people will experience a loss in exactly the same way. Your grief will be as individual as your fingerprint. **No one can tell you how to grieve.** There are no formulas for how much a loss will hurt or how long grief will last. Try not to compare yourself to others in similar situations.

Although everyone experiences grief in different ways, there are common patterns and feelings that most individuals will share. **Allow yourself to feel** these normal emotions so that you can cope with your grief and go on with life. It is important to understand what some normal reactions might be. This will make your behavior more predictable and less frightening to experience. Knowledge of the process will help you to have a better sense of control over your reactions to loss.

Your grief will be different depending on the circumstances of death and your coping strategies. A sudden death, an accident, a suicide or other untimely deaths may complicate your mourning. If you face a change of environment or a loss of financial security as a consequence of death, this can complicate your grief.

The kind of relationship you had with the person who has died is very important to the intensity of your grief. The closer your emotional attachment is to this person, the greater your potential for having a strong grief reaction. It might be said that **grief is the price you pay for love.** Your age, sex, religious beliefs and previous experiences with death will all influence your grief. In short, no one can predict how you will experience grief.

On the reverse side you will find a list of some of the behaviors of grief. You may feel many of these; you may feel few. Your grief will be different from anyone else. Remember your family and friends will be grieving in their own unique way. Be mindful of this, otherwise, you may feel disappointed and all the more isolated.

Certain reactions to death are so common that almost everyone experiences them. The **period of shock** is not long. If the death was unexpected, you may find yourself denying at first that the person has died. This response is nature's way of insulating you from what is happening. Another immediate reaction to a death is **anger.** Most of us were taught as children to avoid anger. Therefore you may feel guilty when your anger will not go away. You may also feel **guilty** for any number of reasons. **It is common to feel guilty** for even being alive.

Depression is probably the hardest part of grief. You may be flooded with despair and feel as if it will never get better. Please try to remember that it does. The anguish occurs when you realize the full impact and the meaning of your loss. The periods of very intense longing and sorrow will diminish with time.

You will not move from one mood to another in any kind of sequence. You will probably have many feelings all at once. Sometimes people become concerned they are getting worse as time progresses rather than better. You may feel worse in six months than you expected you would. **Try not to set expectations for yourself by the calendar.** Take one step at a time, one hour at a time, and one day at a time.

As time goes on and you allow yourself to feel the pain of loss, your grief will diminish. You will not always feel the way you do now. This does not mean you will forget your loved one; it means you accept their death and are coping with life without them. Even though your relationship with your loved one has changed forever, its existence and your **feelings live on forever.**

For many, talking with trusted friends is an effective means of releasing emotions and undergoing healing. Activity is another crucial ingredient of the healing process. Work has a therapeutic value. If you are at home, try to follow a schedule. Physical activity is difficult to undertake while you are feeling depressed, but it can be very restoring to heart and soul. After the early period of grief has passed, finding a group to join can also be helpful. Sometimes, the only thing that keeps us going is the knowledge that **humans can transform something hurtful into positive learning**. Ask yourself this question, “Now that this has happened to me, what shall I do about it?” This question can open doors to the future and give you hope for tomorrow.

All of us have both the right and the responsibility to take our losses seriously. Grief, when ignored or denied, can harm us in countless ways. Facing our losses is part of how we create our tomorrows.

Therese Rando, author of *Grieving: How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies*, says, “Grief allows us to let go of that which was, so we’ll be ready for that which is to be.”

BEHAVIORS OF GRIEF

Because grief can be so painful and overwhelming, it frightens us. Many people wonder if the feelings they have are normal.

MOST PEOPLE WHO SUFFER A LOSS EXPERIENCE ONE OR MORE OF THE FOLLOWING:

- A feeling of tightness in their throat or heaviness in their chest.
- Have an empty feeling in their stomach and lose their appetite.
- Feel guilty at times and angry at other times.
- Feel restless and look for activity but find it difficult to concentrate.
- Feel as though the loss is not real; that it did not happen.
- Sense the loved one’s presence, as in finding themselves expecting the person to walk in the door at the usual time, hearing their voice, or seeing their face.
- Wander aimlessly, forget, and neglect to finish things that they have started around the house.
- Have difficulty sleeping, and dream of their loved one frequently.
- Experience an intense preoccupation with the life of the one who has died.
- Assume mannerism or traits of their loved one.
- Feel guilty or angry over things that did or did not happen in their relationship with the person who has died.
- Feel intensely angry at the loved one for leaving them.
- Feel as though they need to change for people who seem uncomfortable around them by politely not talking about their feelings of loss.
- Need to tell and retell and remember things about the loved one and the experience of his or her death.
- Cry at unexpected times.

All of these are natural and normal grief responses. It is important to cry and talk with people when you need to. By learning about the process of grief and learning also to express your feelings about the experience, you are helping yourself to arrive at a healthy readjustment of your life and a reinvestment of your emotional energy.