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Grief and Loss

What is grief like?

Grief is our response to loss. It is the normal, natural and inevitable response to loss, and it can affect every part of our life, but it is varied and different for different people.

We may experience intense feelings such as sadness, anger, anxiety, disbelief, panic, relief or even numbness. It can also affect our thinking, so that we may think we will never get over this, or we may think we are going crazy. We may think that this is all too hard and wish we were with the person who has died. This does not usually mean that we will take active steps to end life, but can simply be an expression of our pain and sadness. Sometimes grief can cause difficulty in sleeping and can lead to physical symptoms. If these symptoms persist, check with your doctor to exclude other causes.

About grief

When people grieve they are coming to terms with what has changed in their lives. Following loss the grieving person has to relearn the world and themselves because everything has changed. Grief is not an illness. We don't 'get over' profound grief because we are changed both by our love and by the loss of our loved one. But life will eventually have meaning again, although our loss will always be part of us. Eventually we will learn to live with our loss. It is not unusual for grief to be felt over an extended period of time, even for many years.



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How do we grieve?

Everyone grieves in his or her own way. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Some people do not show their grief in public, but only express it in private. We do not always know how people are grieving simply by what we see. Some people are open and expressive with their grief, crying, and wanting to talk, whilst others are more private and may be reluctant to talk and prefer to keep busy. Men and women sometimes may grieve differently even in the same families, but it is important to respect each other's way of grieving.

It is not unusual for people to have "extraordinary experiences" such as dreams of their loved one or to have a sense of their presence. Mostly these are comforting and help us to feel close to the person who has died.

"Your grief is like your fingerprint, unique and personal to you." (Irving & Thompson)

Keeping connected

Grief can seem like a roller-coaster ride, with ups and downs, or it may feel like being battered about like a little boat in a storm. But however you experience it, keeping a continuing bond with your loved one can be very helpful and comforting. The love you have for someone does not die just because they have died. People sometimes assume that eventually their grief will shrink to allow room for other things in life and they may worry that if they let go of their grief, they will forget or lose their connection with their loved one, or may even feel disloyal. But, what can happen is that their grief does not go away, but rather their life grows around it.

Helping yourself to get by

Grief is like a journey with many pathways and turnings. Here are some suggestions about how to get through some of the difficult



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times.

I thought that if I held it in and got on with it, it wouldn't hurt so much. The last thing I wanted to do was talk. I didn't want to feel. When I finally did talk about when they died it hurt a lot but then I started to feel better. It was a relief.

Privately and personally

You may sometimes prefer to keep your thoughts and feelings to yourself.

- Try to defer major decisions for 6-12 months that cannot be reversed, e.g. disposing of belongings
- Keep a diary or journal
- Create a memorial - do or make something to honour your loved one
- Develop your own rituals - light a candle, listen to special music, make a special place to think
- Allowing yourself to express your thoughts and feelings privately can help. Write a letter or a poem, draw, collect photos, cry...
- Exercise - do something to use pent-up energy, walk, swim, garden, chop wood
- Draw on religious and spiritual beliefs if this is helpful
- Read about other people's experience - find books and articles
- Do things that are relaxing and soothing
- Some holistic or self care ideas that may assist include meditation, distractions, relaxation, massage, aromatherapy and warmth
- To help with sleeplessness: exercise, limit alcohol, eat well before sleeping, and try to have a routine.

With other people

Sharing with other people can reduce the sense of isolation and aloneness that comes with grief.



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- Allow people to help you, don't be embarrassed to accept their help. You will be able to help someone else at another time. It is your turn now.
- Talk to family and friends; sharing memories and stories, thoughts and feelings can be comforting and strengthen our connection with our loved one
- Consider joining a support group to share with others who have had similar experiences
- Take opportunities to join in public ceremonies where you can be private, yet part of a larger group
- Use rituals and customs that are meaningful to you
- Talk with a counsellor to focus on your unique situation, to find support and comfort, and to find other ways to manage, especially when either your life or your grief seems to be complicated and particularly difficult.

When to seek further help

Although grief can be very painful, most people (80-85%) find that with the support of their family and friends and their own resources, they gradually find ways to learn to live with their loss, and they do not need to seek professional help.

However, sometimes the circumstances of the death may have been particularly distressing, such as a traumatic or sudden death, or there may be circumstances in your life which make your grief particularly acute or complicated. You could consider seeking professional help if –

- You do not have people who can listen to you and care for you
- You find yourself unable to manage the tasks of your daily life, such as going to work or caring for your children
- Your personal relationships are being seriously affected
- You have persistent thoughts of harm to yourself or anyone else
- You persistently over-use alcohol or other drugs



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- You experience panic attacks or other serious anxiety or depression
- Over time you remain preoccupied and acutely distressed by your grief
- You feel that for whatever reason, you need help to get through this experience

Supporting adults

Commonly asked questions about grief:

How long will this go on?

The journey through grief is a highly individual experience. Rather than focus on a time-line it is perhaps more helpful to focus on its intensity and duration. Initially grief is overwhelming and people can feel out of control. With time people find they have more ability to choose when they access memories and emotions. The intensity of grief is related to the degree of attachment to the person, relationship to the deceased, level of understanding and social support from others, personality and the nature of the bereavement.

Am I going mad?

It may certainly feel like it at times! Particularly if the individuals need to grieve is out of step with social and cultural expectations. Grief affects people physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. People may be required to make adjustments to their lives and learn new skills, at a time when they feel least able to do so. Receiving validation and permission to grieve is important in the recovery and healing process.

Do I have the right to inflict this on others? What can I expect of them and they of me?

Others may feel intensely uncomfortable with the emotion and the



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pain of the bereaved to the point of feeling helpless. The anxiety this causes may mean that the bereaved person might feel they are being avoided - increasing feelings of isolation. It is important that the grieving person is assertive about their needs and wishes, and it is helpful if they communicate with family, friends, and colleagues rather than leave them guessing about what would be useful and comforting. Never underestimate the power of listening and being a warm presence. There are no magic words or actions. Trust your ability to care taking into account your relationship with the person you are trying to help.

Is there a right way and a wrong way of coping with grief?

People are individuals with personalities and life experiences, which influence the way in which they deal with grief. People's style of grieving must be respected and in this sense there is no right or wrong way of coping. However it is generally believed that the amount of support people receive can ameliorate some of the impact of grief and facilitate recovery. People often have an awareness about what they need to do to feel better but feel inhibited or judged and don't act on their inclinations. Talking about what is happening, what they are going through, expressing emotion and being in a supportive and accepting climate is generally helpful. Both religious and cultural factors may impact upon a person's feelings of "right" or "wrong ways" to deal with their grief.

How do I know when I need help?

Reassurance from others who have also experienced grief and an understanding of what people have commonly undergone when grieving can be a helpful yardstick. Any continued fears or anxieties about your well being or thoughts of self-harm should be addressed by seeking help. Prolonged intense emotion or obsessional thought or behaviour that make functioning difficult may also require help.



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Stages of grief

Grief does not follow a linear pattern. It is more like a roller coaster, two steps forward and one step back. Ultimately people manage to integrate the experience to the point of having a new life arising from the old. The loss remains and is always remembered, but the intensity is no longer disabling or disorganising.

Much of grieving is about expressing emotion- some may be unfamiliar, and unacceptable to self or others, e.g. anger, guilt, remorse. Finding a safe place and an accepting person for support to work through all the effects of bereavement is important. The amount of support available from family and friends may be limited if they too are grieving. Misunderstandings can arise when people experience different responses to a shared loss. External supports may then become a vital factor in understanding and expressing your grief. It is important to know that you can survive the experience and that the new life that eventually comes about may have very positive effects despite the difficulty of arriving at this point.

Does counselling help?

It is important to say that grief is a normal response to loss and that people work through the loss with the loving support of family and friends. However, for a variety of reasons it may be necessary to seek professional help in the form of counselling. Counselling may initially intensify painful feelings as the external distractions are removed, and the client is able to focus on their experiences and explore them fully. People who are grieving may need to talk about their story over and over again and are often concerned about the 'wear out' factor on family and friends, especially if details are very distressing. Equally they may find that others have unrealistic expectations of their recovery or experiences. Where people have to continue on in roles as parents or carers counselling may provide valuable time-out for their own need to grieve and receive support. A supportive, safe and accepting environment and time set aside



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regularly can make a great difference. It may provide comfort and hope at a time of great confusion and crisis.

Ten Ways to Help the Bereaved

1. Be present and attentive to the bereaved person.
2. Allow for moments of silence and reflection.
3. Listen in a non-judgemental and accepting way .
4. Avoid the use of clichés such as 'Think of all the good times', 'You can always have another child' .
5. Mention the deceased person's name and encourage the bereaved person to talk about them.
6. Offer practical and emotional support e.g. by minding children or cooking a meal.
7. Understand that tears are normal and healthy part of the grieving process.
8. Don't try to fill in conversations with a lot of outside news.
9. Remember that grief may take years to work through.
10. Acknowledge anniversaries and dates of significance for the bereaved person.

If you are in the position of supporting a grieving person it is important to consider:

1. Understand your limits.

It is important to understand that the death of a person and seeing the grief of others can trigger our own experiences of loss and make us think about losses that may occur to us in the future. These fears and anxieties limit our capacity to provide effective support. Before making promises of support take a moment to consider what your commitment should – and can – be. Think of what might be needed, what you can offer and what constraints will affect your ability to follow through. You need to be fair to yourself and to the person who needs your support. You can then say, “Here’s what I’d like to do, if it



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would be helpful.”

2. Acknowledge the importance of the loss.

You may be reluctant to speak about the loss, however it is important to acknowledge it before you say anything else. Use the name of the deceased. Many people get comfort from hearing the name of someone they love live on: “I was very sad to hear of Frank’s death,” or “I’m so sorry about Janet’s death.” We can also acknowledge the importance of the loss by attending the funeral or with telephone calls, flowers, a sympathy pin, a note or card. Don’t overlook the importance of practical support such as child minding, mowing the lawn or providing a meal. Bereaved people find personal, spontaneous and genuine support especially comforting. Even brief contact is appreciated and remembered.

3. Your most valuable gifts are time and the ability to listen.

An ancient expression says that “God gave us two ears and one mouth – and we should use them in those proportions”. Be available to listen. It is often our ability to let the person tell their story over and over again which helps them make sense of their loss. Talk about the person who died, remembering special qualities, stories or shared moments. Allow plenty of time to listen to the story – and then listen again.

There are no words that can take the pain of loss away. Just being with and available to a grieving person may be the most helpful expression of care. It is often important to accept silence and avoid filling the silence. Never tell the person to think ‘on the bright side’ or to be grateful for (the time together, the absence of suffering or remaining children etc.). Never tell the person to hide their grief, stop feeling their grief, or that it is time to “get back to normal”. Accept their behaviour – tears, quietness, anger and laughter. Grief is more than sadness; at times it is also feelings of anger, guilt and blame. Avoid using euphemisms such as “lost” or “passed on”. Using direct and clear language helps us understand the reality of what has happened.

4. Be aware of the differences in the way people grieve.

Just as we all have different preferences in food and music – grief is



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no different. We all have different safe places. Some grieve with others – family, friends, members of a support group where others grieve more privately and in less visible ways. Some will find comfort in activities such as keeping a journal or gardening others will connect with their pain alone perhaps whilst driving, jogging or in the shower.

In general there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong way’ to grieve. Really try to understand and accept the person. Many things influence how we grieve. It depends not only on the age of the person who died, but the relationship of the bereaved to the deceased, the circumstances of the death, their age, life experience, how much support the bereaved person has available to them, their beliefs and personality.

5. Be informed about supports available in the community

The experience for many bereaved people is that after the last bunch of flowers have been thrown out and the last casserole defrosted that support also disappears. Grief takes time. Be available to the bereaved person on an ongoing basis and remember that anniversaries, birthdays, Father and Mother’s days and holidays such as Christmas, which can reawaken the grief and sadness for many bereaved people



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