

Grief and Loss

By Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D.

[Presentation: T.A.P.S. (Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors) Inc., Annual National Military Survivor Seminar, Arlington, VA, May 24, 2002.]

Grief is normal. Long lasting grief is normal too.

Suffering is not a mental illness. Even animals grieve.

Grief is the hardest of all human emotions.

Originally the word *grieve* meant oppressive, heavy, weighty, suffering, hardship, etc.

Grief has at least three levels:

Loss of the beloved

Feelings of powerlessness at not having been able to save the beloved

Heightened awareness of your own mortality

Grief can be terrifying.

Loss of control: You might find yourself wondering how much or how long you will grieve, feel you have little control over either, and fear losing control.

Everyone can master a grief but he that has it. Shakespeare

Facing the Void: Losing someone you love creates a void inside of you. No matter how many caring people surround you or how many interests you have, your loved one is irreplaceable, leaving you with an empty spot that no other person or activity can fill.

Delving into the Unknown: If taking care of the deceased had been the focus of your life for any significant period of time, the void caused by their death may feel especially large. For their sake, you may have given up other relationships and activities. And now that they're gone, you need to start over and may be facing a bewildering array of choices as to where to invest your time and energy.

On the other hand, if the deceased had helped you in certain ways, you must now take responsibility for whatever tasks they had previously assumed. For many persons, taking on these additional responsibilities can be quite stressful, especially since these new duties can serve as constant reminders of the deceased.

Grief is confusing.

Grief usually involves more than one emotion. In addition to sorrow, you may be feeling anger, guilt, fear, anxiety, and perhaps even relief or a sense of freedom. Some of your emotions might seem contradictory. E.g., you may miss your loved one terribly, yet be furious at them for leaving you (by dying) or for the ways they wronged or disappointed you in the past. Yet it is normal to experience these and other contradictory emotions simultaneously, sequentially, and repeatedly.

Grieving can increase your need to be with others, while at the same time increasing your need to be alone.

Grief can challenge your ideals about certain institutions and people (e.g., medical professionals, insurance companies, specific persons, the government, etc.)

Grief can raise questions about the meaning of life and your spiritual beliefs.

Grief can be overwhelming.

Due to your grief, you may be unable to think or function as well as you used to, causing you to doubt yourself.

Your current grief can bring up past griefs, especially unresolved ones.

You may be grieving not only for your own loss, but for the pain being experienced by your children or other family members.

Grief can intensify inner conflicts and existing conflicts with others.

Grief can make normal life transitions (children leaving home, becoming older, relocating, etc.) harder.

Grief colors every aspect of your life.

Physical and Mental: Grief can cause concentration and memory problems, fatigue, and medical problems. (Grieving suppresses the immune system, leaving you more vulnerable to illness.)

Social Double Binds: If you don't grieve "enough," you may fear being seen as selfish, uncaring, or disloyal. But if you find yourself grieving longer or deeper than what others think is permissible, you may fear being seen as "weak," "self-centered," "overly dependent," "dwelling in the past," "having a pity party," etc.

Some may view your tears as "losing it" or otherwise may ridicule you. Yet unresolved grief lies at the root of many psychiatric and medical problems. Hence, instead of your tears

meaning that you are “losing it,” they could signify that you are “finding it.” Keep in mind that the only way to “get over it” is to pass through it; i.e., to feel the pain.

Other Relationship Strains:

Family disagreements about how to grieve or memorialize the deceased

Anger and jealousy towards those who aren't bereaved

Anger and guilt when others urge you to “get past it,” “move on” or “get a life.”

Social withdrawal due to self-doubts and insecurities caused by difficulties meeting personal and social standards

Suggestions for Coping with Grief

1. Allow yourself to grieve.

Grieving is exhausting. But fighting it is even more exhausting.

Between grief and nothing I will take grief. William Faulkner

2. Educate yourself about grief. There are plenty of articles and books on grieving; and some hospitals and community centers offer free or low-cost, short-term grief groups. If you find that a particular grief group doesn't help you, you needn't return.

3. Brace yourself for the profound loneliness of carrying your loss.

Grief can't be shared. Everyone carries it alone. Anne Lindberg

4. Prepare for predictable hard times--anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, etc.

5. Don't expect yourself to be consistent or your mood to be stable.

6. Temporarily lower your expectations of yourself. Lightening the load is best, for grieving requires a great deal of emotional and physical energy

7. Try not to judge your feelings.

In her landmark book, On Death and Dying, Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross (1981) explains that the grieving process consists of five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Not only those who are dying, she writes, but those who suffer the loss of a loved one or some other major loss can experience these five stages of grief.

The length of the time spent in each stage varies from one person to the next. But during all five stages, feelings of fear, despair, disorganization, guilt, anxiety, and even surges of energy can

be experienced.

In addition, these stages are not linear; i.e., you don't go from stage 1 to stage 2 to stage 3, etc. until you're finally and forever done with grieving. Also, you can be in more than one stage at the same time and go back and forth between stages. At times you may feel you've finally accepted the loss, when, suddenly, you find yourself in stage 1 or 2 again.

Denial. In the first stage -- denial or shock -- the loss created by the loss is not acknowledged. For example, you may feel you are dreaming.

Anger. Once your denial is cracked, expect to be flooded with anger. You may be angry at life, the universe, or the deity of your understanding for giving you such hardships or at the human error, human indifference, or human malice that caused or contributed to your loss. You may also be furious at your powerlessness to reverse the loss, at any errors you feel you made, and at having to on living with so much pain.

Bargaining. The bargaining stage is characterized by excessive and often irrational self-blame as you review the past for the "what ifs" that might have prevented the loss.

Depression. There are many kinds of depression: the normal fluctuations in mood experienced by almost everyone; clinical depressions requiring professional care; and the depression associated with the grieving process. If you are experiencing this last type, remember that this is a normal response to an extremely stressful situation.

If you are grieving, you are under severe stress. Not only are you coping with your loss, but with your normal responsibilities, the reactions of others, and any number of decisions and arrangements for the reordering of your life. At the same time, you are suffering the loss of yourself as you once were and the disruption to your family or career caused by the loss.

The depression associated with the grieving process may be temporary, but it can still be intense and painful. You can expect all the symptoms associated with clinical depression: difficulty concentration, low- self-esteem, changes in eating and sleeping habits, feelings of futility and hopelessness, and/or various physical problems such as backaches, headaches, vomiting, or constipation.

Extreme fatigue, and its opposite, physical agitation, are common to depression. You may find every little task an overwhelming burden, see little hope for your situation, feel tired all the time, and find little or no pleasure from people or events that normally would please you.

Acceptance. Acceptance is the final stage of grief. After you passing through the other stages, you will feel less depressed and enraged about your loss. Instead, you will simply accept the loss and the emotional toll it has taken; and although you will remember your deceased love one, the pain will have lessened. Acceptance does not mean that you are happy, but that you have stopped fighting your own limitations and the reality of the loss and its consequences.

Perhaps you can compensate yourself to some extent for what you have lost. However, part of acceptance is realizing that whatever compensations you arrange for yourself are partial at best. There is no way to restore what you have lost. In the acceptance stage, you accept whatever pain you have and try to be as kind and loving to yourself as you would be to a wounded child. Yet you realize that no amount of self-care can eliminate all of the pain.

8. Everyone expresses grief differently and at different times.

There is no set pattern for grieving. There's no "right way" to grieve or rules to follow. Each person expresses their grief in their own way.

Weeping isn't the only way. Some people never cry. Instead they carry a personal memento in their pocket, meditate, garden, fast, pray, light a candle, write, or journal.

"Give sorrow words. The grief that doesn't speak, whispers to the o'er fraught heart and bid it break." Shakespeare

9. Writing to the Deceased One option is to write a letter to the deceased, and, if you wish, write a response to your letter as you imagine the deceased would have responded if they were still alive. You can continue writing letters back and forth as long as you find it helpful.

10. Talk about the Death, the Deceased, and the Relationship. It's okay to talk about the details of the death; the personality and life of the deceased; and the kind of relationship you had with the deceased. And usually once is not enough. However, see 11 below.

11. Avoid Critical People. Share your grief only with persons you feel are safe; i.e., people you feel sincerely care about you and are able to tolerate listening to your pain. If someone turns out not to be as safe as expected, then simply state that you wish to change the subject.

12. Go through the motions.

When you feel lifeless and like giving up, try to do the basics of living (e.g., get enough food, water, sleep, etc.; brush your teeth; feed your cat; take a shower; etc.).

13. Take the time to reexamine priorities.

Grief drives men into habits of serious reflection, sharpens the understanding and softens the heart. John Adams

13. Ask yourself, “What’s left?” “What can I do now?”

14. Get Help

If you are chronically feeling depressed, guilty, or angry or if you develop an addiction or other mental health or medical problem, consult a qualified health professional.

14. When all else fails, help someone else.