

A Practical Guide to Coping with Grief

Understanding the Grief Process

Grief is a natural process that requires time to resolve. Coping with grief depends on many factors, from personal beliefs to one's current stressors. Feelings associated with grief can be overwhelming and getting through each day may be difficult. There are no clear guidelines for the grief process. Each person will resolve their grief in their own time and in their own way. However, there are five common stages related to coping with grief:

- 1. Denial and isolation.** This is the initial reaction when confronted with loss. There is a tendency to deny the loss and to isolate from others in order to avoid talking about the experience and its effects.
- 2. Anger.** Once the shock of the loss has subsided, it is common to feel anger—anger that the loss took place, anger at oneself or others for letting it happen, and anger at the “unfair” world. Anger may be displaced onto others or towards oneself. This can be a very emotional stage.
- 3. Bargaining.** This is an attempt to postpone grieving for the loss.
- 4. Depression.** Anger may be replaced by feeling numb and experiencing profound sadness which, in turn, can lead to feelings of depression and a sense of helplessness. This is a typical reaction to grief.
- 5. Acceptance.** The grieving person is now ready to accept the reality of what has taken place. The grieving process cannot be resolved until there is acceptance of the loss. Once that happens, one is able to move forward because the loss has been put in its proper context.

Sometimes the circumstances surrounding the loss can make the grieving process complicated. For example, a sudden or unnatural death (any act of violence) makes the grieving process more difficult. It can be also difficult to accept when a young person/child dies. Often there are feelings of guilt and helplessness following the death of a loved one. It is common to feel guilt and think: “Why couldn't I have done something to prevent this from happening?” This is referred to as “survivor's guilt” and is regarded as a normal reaction to loss.

It is important to allow oneself the time to process the event and to talk through the different feelings one may be experiencing. People can experience a wide range of emotions in a short time. Please be reminded that not everyone goes through the above stages at the same time. Some people may not even follow the stages discussed above.

Strategies for Coping

- **Share your feelings.** Express your feelings as they arise. Take time to cry, if needed. Share your feelings with others as they may be experiencing the same feelings you are. Mutual support can help you get through the grieving process.
- **Find someone you trust.** Talk with a family member or close friend about your grief. Talking about it will help you resolve your grief much quicker.
- **Take care of yourself.** Get enough rest and eat regularly. If you are irritable from lack of sleep or if you are not eating regularly, you will have less energy to cope.
- **Make daily decisions.** This will give you a feeling of control over your life. Know your limits. If a problem is beyond your control and cannot be changed, accept it.
- **Maintain your daily routine.** This will also give you a feeling of control over your life.
- **Practice relaxation and meditation.** Create a quiet scene. You can't always get away from a situation, but you can visualize a quiet scene or a walk along the beach. Such visualization will temporarily remove you from your present situation.
- **Create a pleasant environment.** At home, in your office or car play soft background music. Surround yourself with things you like and enjoy.
- **Take one thing at a time.** At this time, any ordinary workload may seem overwhelming. Perform one task at a time until the project is completed.

- **Allow extra time.** If you usually plan half an hour to complete a specific task, schedule forty-five minutes to complete it. Do the best you can. Don't be too critical of yourself.
- **Take a break.** Reading a favorite book or watching a favorite TV program will give you the break that you may need to relax.

Common Reactions to Grief

Physical Reactions

- Fatigue
- Sadness
- Insomnia
- Headaches
- Loss of appetite

Cognitive Reactions

- Confusion
- Hyper-vigilance
- Intrusive memory
- Recurrent thoughts
- Lack of concentration

Emotional Reactions

- Anger
- Denial
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Depression
- Apprehension
- Grief and sadness

Behavioral Reactions

- Emotional outbursts
- Avoidance of others
- Impaired work performance
- Increase in alcohol consumption
- Increased interpersonal conflicts
- Decreased interests in usual activities
- Trouble sleeping or excessive sleeping

Do's and Don'ts during the Grief Process

People who experience grief may often demonstrate changes in behavior. These suggestions will help reduce the probability of long-term reactions.

Do's

- Get enough rest.
- Maintain regular diet.
- Take one thing at a time.
- Follow a familiar routine.
- Talk to supportive people.
- Maintain exercise regimen.
- Spend time with family/friends.
- Expect the experience to upset you.
- Contact your EAP, if your reactions persist.

Don'ts

- Don't stay away from work.
- Don't withdraw from others.
- Don't look for easy answers.
- Don't increase caffeine intake.
- Don't reduce leisure activities.
- Don't make major life changes.
- Don't drink alcohol excessively.
- Don't take on new major projects.
- Don't have unrealistic expectations.

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