

Ithaca College Counseling and Psychological Services

(607) 274-3136

<http://www.ithaca.edu/sacl/counseling/>

WHAT IS GRIEF?

Grief is a normal and natural, though often deeply painful, response to loss. The death of a loved one is the most common way we think of loss, but many other significant changes in one's life can involve loss and therefore grief. Everyone experiences loss and grief at some time. The more significant the loss, the more intense the grief is likely to be.

Each individual experiences and expresses grief differently. For example, one person may withdraw and feel helpless, while another might be angry and want to take some action. No matter what the reaction, the grieving person needs the support of others. A helper needs to anticipate the possibility of a wide range of emotions and behaviors, accept the grieving person's reactions, and respond accordingly. Therefore, it is often useful for the person in grief and for the helper to have information about the grieving process.

THE PROCESS OF GRIEF

The process of grieving in response to a significant loss requires time, patience, courage, and support. The grieving person will likely experience many changes throughout the process. Many writers and helpers have described these changes beginning with an experience of **shock**, followed by a long process of **suffering**, and finally a process of **recovery**. These processes are described below.

SHOCK is often the initial reaction to loss. Shock is the person's emotional protection from being too suddenly overwhelmed by the loss. The grieving person may feel stunned, numb, or in disbelief concerning the loss. While in shock the person may not be able to make even simple decisions. Friends and family may need to simply sit, listen, and assist with the person's basic daily needs. Shock may last a matter of minutes, hours, or (in severely traumatic losses) days.

SUFFERING is the long period of grief during which the person gradually comes to terms with the reality of the loss. The suffering process typically involves a wide range of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, as well as an overall sense of life seeming **chaotic and disorganized**. The duration of the suffering process differs with each person, partly depending on the nature of the loss experienced. Some common features of suffering include:

- **Sadness.** Sadness is perhaps the most common feeling found in grief. It is often but not necessarily manifested in crying. Sadness is often triggered by reminders of the loss and its permanence. Sadness may become quite intense and be experienced as emptiness or despair.

- **Anger.** Anger can be one of the most confusing feelings for the grieving person. Anger is a frequent response to feeling powerless, frustrated, or even abandoned. Anger is also a common response to feeling threatened; a significant loss can threaten a person's basic beliefs about self and about life in general. Consequently, anger may be directed at self, at God, at life in general for the injustice of the loss, for others involved, or, in the case of death, at the deceased for dying.

●**Guilt.** Guilt and less extreme self-reproach are common reactions to things the griever did or failed to do before the loss. For example, a griever may reproach him/herself for hurtful things said, loving things left unsaid, not having been kind enough when the chance was available, actions not taken that might have prevented the loss, etc.

●**Anxiety.** Anxiety can range from mild insecurity to strong panic attacks; it can also be fleeting or persistent. Often, grievors become anxious about their ability to take care of themselves following a loss. Also they may become concerned about the well-being of other loved ones.

●**Physical, behavioral and cognitive symptoms.** Often, grief is accompanied by periods of fatigue, loss of motivation or desire for things that were once enjoyable, changes in sleeping and eating patterns, confusion, preoccupation, and loss of concentration.

Suffering is often the most painful and protracted stage for the griever, but it is still necessary. For most people, these many emotional and physical reactions are common symptoms that will stabilize and diminish with time as the person moves through the grieving process. If these symptoms persist, it may be important to seek professional help.

RECOVERY, the goal of grieving, is not the elimination of all the pain or the memories of the loss. Instead, the goal is to reorganize one's life so that the loss is one important part of life rather than the center of one's life. As recovery takes place, the individual is better able to accept the loss, resume a "normal" life, and to reinvest time, attention, energy and emotion into other parts of his/her life. The loss is still felt, but the loss has become part of the griever's more typical feelings and experiences.

"In shock your actions are mechanical. You do what you have to do. In suffering your actions are forced by convention or by your own restlessness. But in recovery, your actions are by your own free choice." (Kreis & Pattie, 1969).

OBSTACLES TO HEALING

Grief is a misunderstood and neglected process in life. Because responding to death is often awkward, uncomfortable, even frightening for both grievors and helpers, those concerned may avoid dealing with grief. This can make the experience more lonely and unhappy than it might be otherwise.

In addition, society promotes many misconceptions about grief that may actually hinder the recovery and growth that follow loss. For example, many believe it necessary to try to change how a grieving friend is feeling and may do so by making statements such as, "You must be strong," "You have to get on with your life," or "It's good that he didn't have to suffer." Such cliches may help the one saying them, but are rarely helpful to the griever. Society also promotes the misconception that it is not appropriate to show emotions except at the funeral, and that recovery should be complete within six months. A helper needs to avoid these and other ways of minimizing a person's grief. Those in grief need to be encouraged to recover in their own ways.

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GUIDELINES FOR HELPING

Helpers often ask questions such as: "What should I do? What should I say? Am I doing the right thing? Did I do the wrong thing?" Here are some suggestions for helping the person in grief.

- Make contact.** Make a phone call, send a card, attend the funeral, bake and deliver cookies. Don't let discomfort, fear, or uncertainty stand in the way of making contact and being a friend.
- Provide practical help.** It's usually not enough to say, "If there's anything I can do, let me know." Decide on a task you can help with and make the offer.
- Be available and accepting.** Accept the words and feelings expressed, avoid being judgmental or taking their feelings personally, avoid telling them how they should feel or what they should do.
- Be a good listener.** Many in grief need to talk about their loss; the person, related events, and their reactions. Allow grievers to tell their stories and express their feelings. Be patient and accepting of their expressions.
- Exercise patience.** Give bereaved people "permission" to grieve for as long or short a time as needed. Make it clear that there is no sense of "urgency" when you visit or talk. Remember, there are no shortcuts.
- Encourage self-care.** Encourage bereaved people to attend to physical needs, postpone major decisions, allow themselves to grieve and to recover. At the same time, they may need your support in getting back into activities and making decisions.
- Model good self-care.** It's important for you to maintain a realistic and positive perspective, to maintain your own life and responsibilities, and to seek help when you feel overwhelmed or don't know how to handle a situation.

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