



ADVANCING SCIENCE AND PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF TRAUMATIC STRESS

## Grief: Taking Care of Yourself in the Aftermath of Loss

There are many different ways to take care of oneself during grieving, which may vary depending on a variety of factors, including the amount of time since the death, your background and/or personality, your relationship with the person who died, and the context of your life in the wake of the death. Here are a few strategies that have been noted by others to mitigate or reduce grief over time. Not all of them are necessary or appropriate for everyone, but they may provide some possible options for self-care.

### ***Social Processes:***

- *Reach out to you closest friends.* As people get older, they typically focus on a smaller set of meaningful relationships, and the quality of friendships becomes a more important factor in happiness than the quantity. Not everyone feels comfortable talking openly about personal losses. We all make our own choices about when, where, and if we want to express our feelings. However, evidence suggests that opening up about traumatic or loss events can improve mental and physical health and can help you understand your own emotions and feel understood, rather than isolated.
- *Reach out to those who have been through similar situations.* The most helpful support often comes from those who have suffered similar losses. Instead of saying, "I'm sorry for your loss," they might validate what you're experiencing and let you know how they got through it. Just being with them may feel comforting. Seeing how they've endured may give you hope or help you to feel less alone. They may not have to say many words, but you still feel understood via the kinship of shared or similar experiences.
- *Be clear and authentic when others reach out to you.* You can make changes in your actions to make better connections with the people you choose to be more authentic with. For instance, if you automatically answer the question "How are you?" with "Fine," it doesn't encourage those you're close with to ask further questions. If you don't give a true response the other person may not feel comfortable pushing for one. In order to get better support from them, instead of saying "I'm fine," you could say something like, "I'm not fine, but I appreciate you asking and it's nice to be

able to be honest about that with you." Let them know when you may want to have more authentic conversations, and when the timing is right, you do want to talk more in-depth with them. In the meantime, you can tell them the best times and ways to reach out, such as in person, over the phone, over food, or by text. You can also tell them that it's okay for them to ask you questions or talk about how they feel too, especially if they seem to be feeling paralyzed when you're around, worrying that they might say the wrong thing.

### ***Mental Processes:***

- *Focus on how sadness or despair will feel less acute with time.* Studies reveal that we tend to overestimate how long negative events will affect us, but most people who have lived through tragedy say that over time the sadness subsides.
- *Focus on the moments when the pain temporarily eases up.* Learn that no matter how sad you feel, another break will eventually come. It can help you regain a sense of control.
- *Focus on being realistic.* Words like "never" and "always" are signs of permanence, which can make recovery more difficult. Try to reduce the words "never" and "always" and replace them with "sometimes" and "lately." "I will *always* feel this awful" becomes "I *often* feel this awful, but over time it might just be *sometimes*."
- *Focus on reality.* Instead of being surprised by the negative feelings, plan for them. Rather than feeling sad that you are down or grief-stricken, or anxious that you are anxious. Admit that you cannot control when emotions arise. Take "feeling breaks" and stop fighting those moments, and you may find that they pass more quickly.
- *Focus on acceptance.* We all deal with loss: jobs lost, loves lost, lives lost. The question is not whether these things will happen. They will, and we will have to face them. Resilience comes from analyzing how we process grief and from simply accepting that grief. Sometimes we have less control than we think. Other times we have more. Accept that aging, sickness, and loss are inevitable. It lessens our pain because we end up "making friends with our own fears."
- *Focus on worst-case scenarios.* Rather than trying to find positive thoughts, think about how much worse things could be. Find other things to be grateful about, which research has shown can increase happiness and health by reminding us of the good in other areas of life.
- *Focus on changing beliefs that don't serve you.* For instance, consider that the way you typically respond to offers of help from people might need to change in some circumstances. Some people hate asking for help, hate needing it, or worry that they will be a burden to everyone. They may define friendship by what *they* can offer, such as advice, support, or practical help. If you are like this, you may need to change this pattern when grieving. Rather than focusing on feeling like a burden, you may need to reframe your thought that *friendship isn't only what you can give, it's what you're able to receive*. And by receiving it, you can better give back to others going through similar situations in the future.
- *Focus on honoring.* Find a way to honor the loss. Writing or creating a ritual can help you feel connected to the person, give his/her life continuing meaning, and allow you to live in a way that honors and reaffirms your relationship, instead of cutting ties, "getting over it," and moving on with your life. Once the initial shock of grief wears off, many bereaved people realize that the best way to pay tribute to their loved ones is not through their own pain and suffering, not through their own

metaphorical death, but by living on as fully as possible, or by living as the other person would want them to live.

- *Focus on philosophy/religion/or values.* This can help you gain a broader view, gain a sense that you or your loved ones are looked after, and feel connected to a greater power. For example, for some people, turning to God gives them a sense of being enveloped in grace that is eternal and ultimately strong. Or it may result in the realization that you are connected to something much larger than yourself or connected to a universal human experience.
- *Focus on healing.* If you continue to experience debilitating or highly distressing feelings of grief, post-traumatic symptoms, or depression, consider talking to someone who specializes in prolonged or traumatic grief. There are evidence-based treatments that can give ongoing support and guidance to learn to correct unhelpful thoughts and beliefs, find positive coping strategies, and gain meaning from the loss. Treatment can help you find ways to honor and maintain positive memories of the person/people you lost, work towards accepting the death, manage emotions like anger or avoidance, resume normal day-to-day life, and look forward to a better future.

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