

Grief and Loss

Introduction

There are no simple answers to complex issues. Everyone grieves differently. Some individuals cry; others are stoic. Some people are able to process their grief until a special occasion, such as a birthday or holiday, and then find themselves at a loss. All of these reactions are natural and normal. There is no “right” way to grieve.



The Stages of Grief

The majority of people go through the following stages of grief when a loved one dies or when they know that they themselves will die soon. These stages are listed below.

Denial: Denial is most evident in the early period after the person becomes aware of an impending death or the death of a loved one. It is a normal coping mechanism to buffer shock.

Anger or Rage: When one can no longer maintain denial, he or she may feel angry and ask, “Why me?” or “Why my loved one?” The person may displace the anger and project it onto someone else. If you are the target of the displaced anger, it is important for you to realize this and to be understanding of the person who has suffered the loss.

Bargaining: Bargaining is an attempt to postpone the inevitable. Most bargains are with God (or other religious figures) and almost always include wishes for the removal of pain, for prolonged life, or for the return of life.

Depression: When an individual is no longer able to deny the death, when anger and rage have dissipated, and when bargaining efforts seem hopeless, depression often begins. Depression is characterized by overwhelming feelings of loss.

In the instance of death and dying, there are two types of depression:
(1) preparatory and (2) reactive.

- Preparatory depression takes impending loss into account. It results from the anticipation of loss that comes with death and dying.
- Reactive depression is a result of the loss that accompanies death and dying.

Acceptance: Acceptance should not be mistaken for happiness or admission of defeat. Rather, when a person can accept his or her own imminent death or the death of a loved one, he or she can live without giving up the life that remains.

Coping with Grief

Grief is a process, and everyone grieves at his or her own pace. The grief and loss experienced at the death of a loved one never truly go away. They become more bearable only with time. Allowing yourself to go through a process of mourning will help you adjust to the loss.

The six R processes of mourning are listed below.

1. **Recognize the loss.** Acknowledge and understand the death. Take your time; don't be rushed.
2. **React to the separation.** Feel, identify, accept, and give some form of expression to all the psychological reactions to the loss. Allow yourself to cry. Know that you will have good days and bad days.
3. **Recollect and re-experience the deceased and the relationship.** Review and remember realistically. Allow yourself to revive and re-experience the feelings. Remember and share.
4. **Relinquish your past attachment** to the deceased. This does not mean that you should forget your loved one or get rid of everything that was his/hers. It means that you should gradually relinquish objects or old ties to the deceased, allowing you to form new ones in your new life. However, try to put off major decisions for a while (generally one year).
5. **Readjust to move adaptively into the new world** without forgetting the old. Revise your new life without your loved one and adopt new ways of being in the world. In the beginning, you may need to purposefully plan each day.
6. **Reinvest.** Balance in life returns little by little, and it takes different amounts of time for different people. Grief never truly goes away but lessens. Life goes on, again.

If you know someone who is grieving, try to offer support. The hardest time periods after a death tend to be at three to six weeks after the death; three, six, and twelve months after the loss; and special holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries. The second year is often harder for the close family and friends.

Here are some suggestions of most and least helpful statements to say to bereaved individuals.

Most Helpful

"I am here if you need somebody to talk to."
"If there is anything I can do, please let me know."
"Put your faith in God" (or other appropriate spiritual response).
"Tell me how you are feeling."
"He/she will always be alive in your memories."

Least Helpful

"Didn't the funeral home do a good job?"
"Did you know this was going to happen?"
"Was he/she in much pain?"
"It's okay to be angry."
"It was so sudden."

References:

- Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) *On Death and Dying*
Kenneth Doka (1995) *Living with Grief After Sudden Loss*
L.M. Range, A. Watson, P. Polles (1992) "Helpful and unhelpful comments after suicide, homicide, accident, and natural death" *Omega, Journal of Death and Dying* 25 p 25-32.

The Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service offers its programs to all eligible persons regardless of race, color, national origin, religion, gender, age, disability, marital or veteran status, or any other legally protected status, and is an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Employer.