

# CLEMSON

COUNSELING & PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

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## UNDERSTANDING THE PERSONAL RESPONSE TO DEATH, LOSS AND GRIEF

### **The Healing Process of Grief**

In the course of a lifetime, we develop relationships with others. Some of these relationships we are born into, others we develop along the way. It is because of these meaningful connections that the death of a loved one is one of the most severe experiences we encounter. It is very normal to react with a sense of loss. Grieving is the healthy response to that loss—a tribute to the one loved who has crossed over. Grieving is a process often riddled with intense and varied emotions. There is no one “right way” to grieve and the length of the grief process is different for everyone. Be gentle and patient with yourself as you experience your unique reactions to your loss. Kubler-Ross’ stages of grief can give us a framework for understanding the process. These stages are not linear and the grieving person may alter the order and combine characteristics of the various stages in unique ways.

#### ***Denial***

- Typically experienced when we first hear the news of the death.
- Serves to protect us from feeling the intensity of the loss all at once.
- This diminishes as we come to acknowledge the loss.

#### ***Anger***

- This reaction commonly takes the form of helplessness and powerlessness.
- Anger may be directed at specific people for not protecting enough, at a diffuse whole, or at self.

#### ***Bargaining***

- “If only I had done such... the death would not have occurred”.
- Feelings of remorse and guilt may also emerge at this stage.

#### ***Depression***

- As one recognizes the extent of the loss, one may feel symptoms of depression.
- Sleep and appetite disturbances, low energy, lack of motivation, reduced concentration.
- Feelings of loneliness, sadness, emptiness, self-pity may also emerge.

#### ***Acceptance***

- An acceptance of the loss and the finality of the death begin to emerge.

## **Common Reactions to Loss**

### ***Emotional reactions***

- Numbness, shock, denial
- Sadness, loneliness
- Surprise
- Blame
- Anger, irritability
- Tearfulness, crying
- Fear of death, fear for one's safety

### ***Physical symptoms***

- Changes in sleep and/or eating patterns
- Anxiety/Hypervigilance/Agitation
- Exaggerated startle response
- Increased pains, gastric disturbances, physical complaints
- Fatigue

### ***Changes in Behavior***

- Social withdrawal and/or isolation
- Engaging in behaviors that are out of character for the person
- Preoccupation with the deceased
- Avoidance of reminders of the deceased
- Increase use of alcohol and other drugs

### ***Changes in Thinking***

- Poor concentration
- Absentmindedness
- Confusion, forgetfulness
- Surreal feelings

## **Moving beyond grief: How to help yourself**

Grieving is an active process that requires balance. Strive for balance between the time you spend grieving and the time you spend facing your daily demands; between the time spent with others and the time spent alone; between the time spent helping others and the time caring for yourself. Working through the grief does not mean that you are forgetting the deceased loved one. Look inward and see how you have coped with painful times in the past. Grieving is a very individual process and what others find helpful may not be helpful to you. Select what is helpful and set aside what is not. The following is a list of possibilities that others have found helpful.

- Be gentle with yourself. You determine the pace and take whatever time you need. Listen selectively to others that may think "you should be over it by now".
- Allow yourself to feel the grief.

- Try to avoid making major life decisions during the intensity of your grief.
- Expect and accept a reduction of your productivity and efficiency.
- Talk to friends or family about your grief.
- Self care is important. Healthy eating, exercise and sleep are good.
- Journal.
- Participate in social and spiritual rituals (wakes, funerals, memorials).
- Read books or poetry—about grieving or topics totally removed from such
- Plan and engage in social activities. It is O.K. to have a good time.
- If someone offers you help, accept it. Tell them what it is you would like/need.
- Reconnect with your spirituality.
- Carry a linking object as long as beneficial—something that reminds you of your loved one.
- Join with others that share your loss but do not force talking exclusively about the loss.
- Take a yoga class.
- Give of yourself by helping someone else.
- Write down what life is teaching you. Learn from life's lessons.

### **When to seek professional help**

Although grieving is healthy, at times, the intensity is such that it affects one's ability to cope with day-to-day tasks. Professional counseling is available through Counseling and Psychological Services at Redfern Health Center. You can access services Monday-Friday, on a walk-in basis, between 10:00 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. CAPS is open 8-5 Monday-Friday. In case of emergency outside CAPS' business hours, CAPS on-call can be accessed by contacting the Clemson University Police Department at 656-2222. Be prepared to give your phone number and a counselor will return your call. All services are confidential within the limits of the law.

### **Being helpful to others**

Often, it is through helping others that one can also heal. The following are some suggestions for helping the person in grief.

- Be a good listener.
- Be available and accepting.
- Avoid making judgments about how a person should be feeling during their grief.
- Avoid giving easy answers to complex situations.
- Remember the importance of anniversaries, celebrations, and activities shared with the deceased.
- Exercise patience.
- Reaffirm the value in the relationship.
- Be sensitive to the cyclic nature of the grief process.
- Encourage self-care and model self-care.

### Recommended Reading

Colgrove, M., Bloomfield, H. & McWilliams, P. (1991). *How to survive the loss of a love*. Los Angeles, CA: Prelude Press.

Kubler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Kushner, Harold (1981). *When bad things happen to good people*. New York, NY: Schocken Books.

Levang, E. & Ilse, S. (1992). *Remembering with love: Message of hope for the first year of grieving and beyond*. Minneapolis, MN: Deaconess Press.

Neeld, E. (1992). *Seven Choices: Taking the steps to a new life after losing someone you love*. New York, NY: Delacorte.

Rando, Therese (1991). *How to go on living when someone you love dies*. New York, NY: Bantam.

Staudacher, C. (1987). *Beyond grief: A guide for recovering from the death of a loved one*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

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## *To One in Sorrow*

*Let me come where you are weeping, friend,  
 And let me take your hand.  
 I, who have known a sorrow such as yours, can understand.  
 Let me come in—I would be very still beside you in your grief;  
 I would not bid you cease your weeping, friend,  
 Tears bring relief. Let me come in—and hold your hand,  
 For I have known a sorrow such as yours, And understand.*

Grace Noll Crowell