



Working Through Grief

The dam broke only moments after Mary returned from her husband's funeral. So strong she had been at the grave side service—a rock, really. She had held up, chin high, for her young children, for Bob's parents, for the sake of a dignified funeral. How brave you are, friends had said. But now, alone in her bedroom where Bob's clothes still hung, smelling of Brut, the tears came. In torrents. Mary smashed her fist down on the top of her dresser, rattling the bottles of perfume her husband of 15 years had given her. "How could you do this to me?" she shouted through her tears. "How could you leave me like this? You've always left things undone. I hate you. I love you. I miss you. Please come back to me."



It's normal to feel angry when a loved one dies. It's normal to feel sad, helpless, anxious, guilty, lonely. Survivors commonly experience a flood of emotions. This is called grief.

Any kind of loss can make us feel grief. The greater the loss, the more profound those feelings. Grief is not pleasant.

However, grieving is a positive process, not a negative one. Grief helps heal even the deepest emotional wounds. It is not productive to think you can or should avoid it. Nor is it productive to think you must overcome grief. Try to accept it and work through it. Sometimes you need to cry, to remember, to feel your emotions deeply. That's when it's time for the important process known as grief work.

FEELING THE HEARTACHE

Remember: Grief is physical as well as emotional. You might become short of breath. Your

chest might feel tight, your stomach empty or upset. You might not have much energy or strength. Your appetite and sleep patterns might change abruptly. Take heart: In time, these common symptoms of grief fade.

WORKING THROUGH GRIEF

Although grief comes in many forms, it generally follows a distinct pattern. *The process unfolds in stages that vary from person to person or even intertwine and overlap.* But it has a beginning and an end. So whatever you're feeling, rest assured you are not alone. Many, many others have been through this. Generally, the stages of grieving are:

- **Shock.** It might at first be hard to accept the death of a loved one. Some survivors cry, but others are too numb. They're in shock. Shock is a defense mechanism, an anesthetic; it's nature's way of helping us through what otherwise would be unbearable.



- **Disorganization.** As shock subsides, uncertainty and confusion commonly set in. The normal routine has been lost, after all. Planning each day might help. Grieving people often feel disconnected from the mundane. Their actions might seem out of character. Although they sometimes need quiet and solitude, they also need to cry and to talk. It is important for grieving people to give voice to their feelings and emotions.

- **Volatile Emotions.** Anger, bitterness, hostility, and resentment are common components of grief. Such volatile emotions can manifest themselves suddenly and indiscriminately. Doctors, nurses, God, family members, the diseased person, and acquaintances who haven't experienced a similar loss typically are targets. A young widow might feel cheated by her dead husband because he will not be around to grow old with. Or she might be angry at God for not playing fair.

Feelings of anger and resentment are no cause for shame. They should be accepted and expressed. Bottling them up interferes with the grieving process. A friend or professional can help you deal constructively with your feelings.

- **Guilt.** Feelings of guilt and anger might occur simultaneously. Some grieving survivors might feel guilty because they are angry. Others might feel guilty about something regrettable they once said or did to the person who has died. A son, for example, might regret not having visited his mother more while she was alive. Such nagging thoughts often begin with "if only" or "what if." *If only we had called the doctor sooner. What if we had recognized the symptoms earlier?*

Remember: No one is perfect.

It's important during this stage to confide in relatives or trusted friends about your feelings.

- **Loss and Loneliness.** This might be the most painful stage. Many people become depressed when a loved one dies. They don't feel like

doing anything. They withdraw. They feel empty and attach little purpose to life. They feel sorry for themselves. This stage can come quickly and last for months.

The grieving person comes to terms with death's finality and is reminded of it constantly in many small ways: an empty chair, an old photograph, a piece of mail addressed to the deceased. Lean on and confide in a good friend. Seek professional counseling if you think it will help. Attend meetings of support groups.

- **Relief and recovery.** This stage is characterized by feelings of relief. The grieving person realizes the worst is over; life goes on. This realization and the feelings accompanying it sometimes are difficult for the grieving person to acknowledge openly. It is important to remember that feeling relief in no way reflects badly on the grieving person or on the one who has died. It simply marks the beginning of recovery.

Recovery is slow. The process is accelerated when the grieving person talks openly to others about his feelings. Hope builds as recovery progresses and the grieving person begins to look to the future. Phone calls are answered. Opportunities to attend social activities are welcomed. Plans for the future are made. Recovery involves accepting past and present realities, redefining goals, and creating a new lifestyle.

While full recovery requires letting go of the past, it does not necessitate forgetting. Remember your loved one and cherish the experiences you had with him or her. As you recover, it will be possible to remember the past without living in it.

The six stages of grief are fluid; drifting from one to another and back again is common. It can be frustrating when volatile emotions suddenly re-emerge. Feelings of guilt and loneliness might be seen as signs of regression. They are not. In grief, as in many other long, slow processes, episodes of regression are a natural part of progression.



MANAGING GRIEF

While grief is a natural response to loss, it need not flow out of control. Here's how to manage it:

- **Be patient.** It's a long process. Some research indicates the second year after a death can be the most painful. Birthdays, anniversaries and holidays are especially trying.
- **Find support.** A confidant can help you manage grief. Talk to someone about your fears, sadness, anger and hope. A confidant need not be someone who has experienced a similar loss. But it is important that she be sensitive, a good listener, nonjudgmental and able to maintain confidentiality. He or she also should have the time to hear you out.
- **Seek help.** If friends and family cannot provide the support you need, don't hesitate to seek help from clergy, a counselor or a support group. If a support group does not exist in your area, you might be able to start one. Contact people who know one another and who might like to meet informally over coffee. Or ask a professional to help you start a group. Contacting a county counseling agency or an organized group of clergy might help you get started.
- **Vent your emotions.** Crying can help a lot. The need to cry often increases as the shock of a loved one's death subsides. Crying is as natural as laughing; both are healthy. Don't try to hide your emotions—at least not all the time. Find a setting for expressing yourself or a person to confide in and lean on.

Other avenues of emotional release include exercise, work, hobbies, and writing, such as in a diary.

The grief process should not be rushed, but neither should it be slowed. Counselors report that bereaved people often do not realize they are clinging to feelings of grief and self-pity. Some might come to expect unlimited and unending assistance and attention, or they might rely too heavily on support groups. Don't use grief and the support structures you build as a crutch. Move on.

STARTING OVER

Don't despair. The pain will subside. You will never again be the person you were before, however. The grieving process changes you. As you focus on the tasks that confront you today and tomorrow, your memories will be of the person you lost, not of the loss itself. And you will have successfully worked through grief.

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