

Handling Grief and Loss

Grief is a natural response to a significant loss. It is the emotional suffering that you feel when you lose someone or something that you love deeply.

Feelings of loss and grief are not limited to the death of a loved one. Any significant personal loss can result in grief. We experience a sense of loss and grief when a relationship ends. This might include the end of a close friendship or romantic relationship. Major life transitions, such as moving to a new town, can also trigger grief. Traumatic events such as a natural disaster or major accident may also result in grief and loss.

Under any circumstances, the greater the loss, the more grief we feel. Normally, the greater the scope of the adversity and the closer the person is to the tragedy, the stronger the emotional reactions will be. Thankfully, an individual can work through the grief process and recover from loss. Recovery, however, is a slow process.

Everyone will grieve differently. Even those who are grieving the same loss will grieve in different ways. And one person will experience different losses differently.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler developed the five stages of traumatic grief: shock/denial, anger, guilt/bargaining, depression, and, finally, acceptance. Recently, Kessler identified a sixth stage of grief: finding meaning. These stages are common following the death of a loved one. You may skip stages or revisit some. These are typical responses to grief and loss.

Shock/Denial

The first part of the grief process is shock. It is hard to accept that a loved one has died. You can be so numb that it is almost like you cannot feel anything. It is your mind's way of helping you deal with what is almost unbearable. Loss can cause a feeling of disarray. Disorganization and

confusion take over your emotions. Confusion is common once you begin to come out of a state of shock. It is very difficult to do the simplest things when you are in such an emotional upheaval. As you begin the healing process, the feelings you have been denying will begin to surface.

Anger

Both the loss of a loved one and traumatic events can trigger unstable emotions. Anger is often the emotion that is displayed outwardly, but often it is hiding other emotions, such as loneliness, feeling helpless or depressed, and being overwhelmed or exhausted. Grief and trauma experiences often result in anger at some point. Your emotions may bounce back and forth, creating confusion. For example, you will likely still have moments when you laugh or are happy. Try not to feel guilty for these feelings. These emotions are normal, and there is no cause for shame. Accept your feelings. Try not to suppress your anger. Instead, find healthy outlets for it.

Guilt/Bargaining

Survivor guilt is common. You wonder why you did not die, but your loved one did. Your guilt might stem from decisions that were made concerning the death. You may feel guilty even if you had no control over the circumstances of the loss. It is easy to get lost in a maze of “what if” or “if only” statements. We want our loved one to be healed or restored and life to return to how it was before the loss. Many people may bargain with a higher power. For example, you might think, “If I promise to be kinder or volunteer, then can I wake up and realize this was all a bad dream?” You can “what if” or “if only” forever, but the fact is that no human is perfect, and the past cannot be changed. Unfortunately, while hindsight is perfect, no human has foresight.

Depression

Losing a loved one causes loneliness. Emotions triggered by the tragedy can make it easy to become depressed after a death. Depression is an appropriate response to a great loss. You may feel lonely and empty and think that your life has little purpose. People often withdraw from others. Depression may appear as extreme sadness, irritability, or fatigue.

Depression affects our emotions, thinking, behavior, and well-being. It can also disrupt our ability to work, carry out usual daily activities, and have satisfying relationships. It is common to feel sorry for yourself while, at the same time, feeling very grateful for the assistance of others. Depression is one of the many necessary steps along the path of healing from grief and loss. While depression is a common part of the grief process, if symptoms last for more than two weeks, this may be an indication of major depressive disorder.

Acceptance

This stage is about accepting the reality that our loved one is physically gone. It involves recognizing that this new reality is permanent and establishing a new normal. Often this includes recognizing how we've changed as a result of the loss. As you work through the grief process, you can find peace and acceptance. Be sure to make plans for the future. Recovery means accepting the past and present realities, redefining goals, and creating a new normal. The important thing to remember is to be patient. This is a long process, and there will be setbacks. Wedding anniversaries, death anniversaries, birthdays, and holidays will be painful. Some days you may find yourself struggling and not understand why this has happened to you. Give yourself grace as you grieve.

Finding Meaning

After experiencing the loss of a loved one, finding meaning can be an important step in the healing process. How does one find meaning? Meaning can look like rituals or new traditions that come about to celebrate the life of a loved one. It can be picking up a new hobby or even making a change in lifestyle or career. For example, someone who loses a loved one in a tragic manner may advocate for better policies to prevent such circumstances from happening to another family. A family who loses a relative may take

yearly beach trips on the anniversary of their death to celebrate their life and love of the beach. Finding meaning will look different for every individual and every family. While finding meaning does not mean that the pain of the loss or trauma goes away, this step in the grieving process can help individuals find hope for the future.

Coping with the Death of a Loved One

- ▶ **Talk about the death of your loved one.** Tell your friends and family how you are feeling. Avoid isolating yourself or shutting people out. Mention your loved one's name and encourage others to do so, as well.
- ▶ **Accept and express your feelings.** Many different emotions may overwhelm you. Feelings of sadness, anger, confusion, frustration, and exhaustion are typical. Crying can help—in fact, tears often play a part in the healing process.
- ▶ **Take care of yourself and your family.** Eat well, get enough sleep, and be physically active.
- ▶ **Reach out to others who are also grieving the loss.** By helping others, you may feel better, too.
- ▶ **Tell stories about your loved one.** Share memories with friends and family to keep their legacy alive.
- ▶ **Celebrate the life of your loved one.** Make donations in their honor, plant a tree, do something they loved to do, name a child after them. Choose something that celebrates and honors their life.
- ▶ **Ask for and accept help.** Let your support network of family, friends, coworkers, church members, neighbors, and others help you out.
- ▶ **Join a support group.** Sometimes talking with others who have experienced a similar loss can be comforting.
- ▶ **Seek professional help.** If your grief is interfering with your ability to work, carry out daily tasks, or engage in relationships, seek out a professional such as your doctor or a counselor.
- ▶ **Learn more about grief.** Sometimes learning more about what we are experiencing can help us cope. Seek out information in the form of podcasts, blogs, or books (see a few recommended books below).

- ▶ **Spirituality.** Many people find comfort in prayer, meditation, or inspirational readings.
- ▶ **Create a memorial for your loved one.** Create a photo album or scrapbook, write a poem, paint, or create a pillow or blanket out of their clothing. Memorializing your loved one can be healing.

As you work through the grief process, you can find peace and acceptance. No, your life will never be the same as it was before the loss, but your new life can still be satisfying. Always remember the person you lost, but don't forget you still have a purpose.

Additional Reading

On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler

Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief by David Kessler

Chicken Soup for the Grieving Soul: Stories about Life, Death, and Overcoming the Loss of a Loved One by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen

Comfort for Grieving Hearts: Hope and Encouragement for Times of Loss by Gary Roe

References

American Psychological Association (APA). January 1, 2020. *Grief: Coping with the loss of your loved one*. <https://www.apa.org/topics/grief>

National Council for Behavioral Health. *Adult Mental Health First Aid USA*. (1st ed., revised).

On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler

Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief by David Kessler

This publication was adapted from the following publications:

GriefWork: Guides for Survival and Growth and Expressing Kindness in Times of Illness and Death by Sam Quick, PhD, and Betsy Spalding, RN, BSN, The University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service

Triumph Over Tragedy: A Community Response to Managing Trauma in Times of Disaster and Terrorism (2nd ed.), edited by Garret D. Evans and Brenda A. Wiens and prepared by the University of Florida National Rural Behavioral Health Center

How Families and Neighbors Can Help One Another Cope by North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension Service

Establishment and Operation of Shelters Serving Socially Vulnerable Populations: A Socio-Spatial Analysis by Lynn Pike, PhD, Mississippi State University

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