

Questions and Answers About Grief

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What is grief?

Grief is the reaction to loss. Grief applies to a variety of losses. But for the purposes of this discussion, grief is the reaction to the death of a loved one.

There are two types of grief:

- Acute grief: the immediate response to the death of a loved one.
- Bereavement: The ongoing progress of working through grief.

What are the feelings that accompany grief?

While grieving, a person will experience a wide range of emotions, including feelings of fear, anxiety, sadness, anger, guilt, helplessness, loss, confusion and disorientation.

Death and grief are often frightening. People may experience anxiety over fear that they might not survive the loss of someone close, fear that they may die next, fear that someone else may die soon.

While grieving, people may get angry at the fact of death, angry at the person who died, angry at the circumstances around the death or angry at God for taking away a loved one.

People often experience guilt after a loss, especially when there was an ambivalent relationship with the deceased. When someone dies, people may feel guilty over things they did in the past, or things they didn't do or say when the deceased was alive.

Grieving people often feel that there is no pleasure left in life - that they'll never be happy again. They often feel helpless and confused and find it difficult to concentrate. They may forget to take care of themselves out of a lack of concern for their own well being. They may forget to eat or neglect to exercise.

During grief people find themselves constantly thinking about the person who died. That is part of the process of coming to terms with the loss.

These are a few examples of the feelings that accompany grief. A more complete discussion can be found in the book: Grieving: How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Has Died by Therese Rando.

What does a person need to do while grieving?

It is important after a death that people give themselves permission to grieve and feel the loss.

During grief people should be realistic about what they can and cannot do. Because it is difficult to concentrate during grief, it is unrealistic to expect people to be able to do everything they did before the loss. People may slow down on the job, or become disoriented in social situations.

Grieving people need to find a way to express their feelings about the loss. Such outlets can include talking, crying or exercising. During grief the relationship with the deceased needs to be explored, with the view that the relationship has ended.

It is also important that during grief people take care of themselves - remember to eat and exercise, to take prescribed medications, etc.

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Is there a right way and a wrong way to grieve?

No. There is no one way to grieve. Each person finds his or her own way to grieve, and the way to go about it lies within them.

Some people may want to talk and/or cry all the time, and immerse themselves in grief. Other people may talk or cry very little. That doesn't mean they are not going through grief. They just find other expressions for grief, such as writing, gardening or exercising.

Is it important to go through grief?

Yes, it is very important to go through grief. Grief is the process of coming to terms with a loss. Grief is painful and frightening. Some people may try not to feel grief or deny their feelings of loss. It takes more energy to deny a loss and hold off grief than it does to move through the grief process. Trying to avoid grief only prolongs it.

Do people get over grief?

Yes. People do get over grief if they are able to experience it. Grief takes time. At times it seems like the grief will never end. It is important to know that the acute grief - the pain of loss and separation - does diminish over time.

The loss itself remains. But you learn to live with it. It is an ongoing process. People do find happiness again, but they also find that their lives have changed.

How can we help people who are grieving?

Grief is a long-term process. People need help immediately after a loss, and later on after the relatives have gone home and friends have returned to their "normal lives."

Initially during grief assistance may be needed with the simple details of life - funeral arrangements, meals or transportation.

To be the most helpful, offer specific suggestions. "Call me if you need anything" is not necessarily helpful to someone who may not know what they need, or is disoriented. Offer to help with the grocery shopping, baby-sitting the children, or help with any of the other regular tasks of life.

There's a popular misconception that after an "appropriate" time has passed, that it's inappropriate to talk about the deceased. The truth is that during grief people often need to talk about the death and recall memories of the deceased. They are often grateful for the opportunity to do so.

Grief doesn't come and go in six weeks. People need ongoing support. Birthdays and anniversaries are especially difficult times.

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Grieving people need to be listened to. They don't need to be told what to do - to begin dating again, take a vacation, make new friends. These suggestions may seem helpful and logical to the people who are offering them. But they are often of little use, and sometimes a source of agitation, to someone in grief. The simple presence and concern of friends and loved ones are more comforting than suggestions that a grieving person get out more.

Where can people go for help?

To find assistance for those in grief. Contact hospital social workers, clergy, hospices and other social service organizations. Or you can call me at (916) 367-2105.

Bibliography

Schiff, Harriet. The Bereaved Parent. NY: Crown Publ, 1977

(Mother whose ten year old son died from heart disease, interviews other bereaved parents, psychiatrists, religious counselors)

Caine, Lynn. Being a Widow. NY: Arbor House, 1988.

(Well written self-help book full of practical advice and words of wisdom from the author of the best seller, Widow)

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Tatelbaum, Judy. The Courage to Grieve - Creative Living, Recovery and Growth Through Grief. NY: Harper & Row, 1980. (Outstanding book with some exercises; good ideas; compassionate)

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