

GRIEF

What is grief?

We all face numerous losses throughout our lives. The term "Grief" is used to describe reactions and feelings that a person might have to any kind of significant loss. Grieving is a necessary psychological process we experience as the result of a loss. It helps the person come to terms with the loss. The most intense grief experience usually comes from the death of a loved one. We can also grieve over major life changes. Grief often follows:

- (a) loss of a pet
- (b) a parental separation
- (c) separation from family or friends, moving away from home or loss of homeland
- (d) separation or breakup of an intimate relationship
- (e) loss of a job
- (f) leaving school or university
- (g) diagnosis of a serious illness or a loved one's serious illness
- (h) loss of ability to function on a daily basis through an illness or disability
- (i) loss of a pregnancy

Characteristics of grief

There is not a typical response to loss. No two people will ever grieve the same way, with the same intensity, or for the same duration. Grieving is a personal and unique process. How you grieve depends on many factors, including: (a) the nature of the loss, (b) previous losses, (c) the depth, length and/or quality of relationship with the person lost, (d) cultural and religious background, (e) individual coping style, (f) physical health, (g) individual support systems and resources. Questions often arise as to how long grief lasts. There is no timetable for the grieving process. Some grievers overcome grief much more quickly than others. Even though each person's grief is different, there are some commonalities in response to loss.

Common grief reactions

Grief may cause a multitude of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral symptoms. These symptoms might include:

- increased alcohol consumption & use of drugs or tranquilizers which are not prescribed by a psychiatrist
- constant denial of the loss and distressful feelings associated with the loss, keeping busy to avoid the emotional distress of the loss
- constant avoidance of talking or thinking about the topics that are reminders of the loss experienced
- increasing physical complaints and health concerns
- emotional roller coasters for more than two months or social withdrawal and isolation
- constant neglect of self care and/or basic responsibilities (i.e. class absenteeism)
- self-injurious thoughts
- intense, pervasive sense of guilt
- withdrawal from life for one year or more

Coping with grief and loss

Be patient with the process while caring for yourself. You need to allow yourself time to grieve when the loss is the death of someone close to you. Within the first few weeks to months after a death, you may find yourself riding on a roller coaster of shifting emotions. There might be times that flow relatively smoothly. You may have a couple of good days and then a bad one. Sometimes after a period of feeling better, you find yourself in the strong emotions, for example sadness, anger, guilt, despair. You may even feel lost. You may experience declines in your academic and social performance. This is the nature of grief –one moment you are up, and next, you are down. At times like these, it is important to take care of yourself –eat well, relax and exercise. Grief is exhausting; you may feel physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted. Therefore, it is important that you do not take on too much responsibility in the process of grieving.

Get support. It can be good to seek the company of someone who is a good listener –someone who appears to be open to simply listen to you rather than telling you what you should do to cope with the loss you have experienced. People around you sometimes may be unable to make out what you need and may not know what to say or do when they are with you. For this reason, it is

Shock and numbness. The initial reaction to learning about the death of a loved one is shock or disbelief. Those who experience grief following a loss may feel numbness and confusion; the grieving person may not be able to make even simple decisions.

Sadness and longing. Sadness, suffering and longing for the lost loved ones are most common feelings found in grief. People often experience grief reactions in "waves" that come and go. Songs which remind grievers of their loved one or memories that keep intruding into thoughts over time may trigger flashbacks of the death experience. Someone who resembles the lost loved one and places that evoke strong memories are also among the potential triggers.

Physical symptoms. People who are grieving frequently experience physical symptoms, such as feeling of having a lump in the throat, a hollow feeling in the stomach, fatigue or headaches.

Depressive symptoms. Grief may include sleep and appetite disturbances, lack of energy and concentration problems such as listlessness, forgetfulness and absent-mindedness.

Fear and anxiety. Anxiety is a natural reaction to loss. Discomfort, restlessness and a sense of panic are the symptoms that we experience when we feel anxiety. When a loved one dies, it is common for people to have an intense fear of losing another loved one or fears about the future. The death of a loved one can also trigger fears of facing life without that person or the responsibilities one might face alone.

Guilt. It is common for people to have feelings of guilt and excessive feelings of responsibility after a loss. Some grievers may have the feeling that if they handled things differently, their loved ones could still be alive. Memories of arguments, negligence, negative aspects of the relationship shared with the loved one, or things that were left unsaid can come to the fore. They may also feel guilty because they were unable to protect their loved ones.

Loneliness and isolation. People who are grieving may frequently develop feelings of emptiness and deep loneliness even when surrounded by friends and family members. They might envy the life of others and develop beliefs such as "life is unfair". They might have difficulty to tolerate those who are obsessed with 'trivial' daily concerns. Feelings of loneliness might return during the coping process, especially on the special days, including birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, or other special days throughout the year.

Anger. Your anger may be targeted at a number of sources. You may feel anger toward those who don't react to loss in common grief patterns even if they are grieving for the same person, or even toward the person who died and "left" you.

In the wake of a profound experience of loss and grief, many of the assumptions, ideas and beliefs, that we have held about the world and the meaning of life, are often shattered.

Denial. Some grievers refuse to admit the reality of the loss or need time alone as they cope with the death of someone; this is a 'coping mechanism' that people go through to deal with extremely difficult situations and a natural, normal response to loss. There may be times when they don't want to talk about what they are experiencing or refuse any kind of assistance.

Most people adjust to their new lives when the grieving process ends. The loss is still felt, though; there may be moments when they experience sadness. During the coping process, many people learn how they could make sense of life after a loss. People who go through such an experience attach more importance to their dreams and targets and build deeper, even more meaningful relationships. Most grievers do not seek professional support whereas others might find it difficult to overcome the grieving process without outside help. In the latter case, it may be important to be assisted by medical and/or psychological support.

When to seek professional help for grief

Contact a counselor or therapist if you recognize any of the below symptoms of grief:

important that you figure out what is right for you and let them know what your needs are to get the relevant form of support.

Don't make any major decisions. Grief, which is a multifaceted, emotional process, can cloud your thought processes. You may not have the ability to make good long-term decisions because you may feel overwhelmed by the intensity of your feelings. Experts suggest if possible, restraining from making momentous decisions that will affect the rest of your life.

Avoid drinking alcohol or using other drugs. Alcohol and non-prescription drugs will only mask the pain, slow your recovery, and could lead to new problems. Consult a psychiatrist at first if you think you need medical help.

Give yourself a break from grief. We all have some ways to relieve stress such as listening to the music, taking time with friends, or engaging in physical activity. Try keeping yourself busy doing the things you have always enjoyed even if they seem useless and not enjoyable at this time.

Allow yourself to share your feelings. It is important to be able to express grief. Speaking to someone you trust on what you are experiencing will help you to accept the loss and face the associated feelings. Spend time with friends and family members to share your grief. For people who experience difficulty in coping with their loss, counseling (provided by professionally trained people –a counselor, clinical psychologist or a psychiatrist-) may be necessary.

References:

Grief. The Unabridged Student Counseling Virtual Pamphlet Collection.
<http://www.rochester.edu/ucc/help/virtualpamphlet/index.html>

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