

Grief and Loss

There are "helpful" and "unhelpful" choices and behaviors associated with the grieving process. Some behaviors are constructive and encourage facing grief, such as talking with trusted friends, journaling, creating art, and expressing emotion rather than holding it inside. Other grief responses are destructive and may cause long-term complications and consequences. For example, some teens attempt to escape their pain through many of the same escape routes adults choose: alcohol and substance abuse, reckless sexual activity, antisocial behaviors, withdrawal from social activities, excessive sleeping, high risk-taking behaviors, and other methods that temporarily numb the pain of their loss.

Five Typical Stages of Grief

Some people cycle through these stages faster than others, and the stages may show up at different times for different people.

Shock / Denial

Just as your brain uses shock and numbness to cope with physical trauma, shock and denial is the coping mechanism it uses for mental and/or emotional trauma. There are many things going through survivor's minds after a loss, and their minds need time...lots of time to adjust to the reality of what has happened. Shock and denial is the natural way in which this happens.

A part of denial is the subconscious thought that the deceased loved one is just away for a short time and due to arrive at any minute. The phone rings, the door opens and the bereaved expects to see their loved one's smiling face or hear their voice. They may search for their loved one when they are out driving or in a crowd. They know their loved one is dead but they continue not wanting to believe it. Many habits also continue, such as setting a place for them at the table. All this is just a sign of their subconscious denial of death. Denial provides a buffer for them from the reality of what has happened. Some of the feelings of grief include restlessness, numbness, and bewilderment.

Reality and the pain that goes with it; acceptance and the peace that it brings, will come. It just takes time.

Bargaining

Things get tough; the pain becomes overwhelming. So the bereaved enter, consciously or unconsciously, into some form of negotiation. Generally this is with God; sometimes it is even with the devil. They bargain with whomever they feel can relieve their situation.

Bargaining is really an attempt to postpone; it has to include a prize offered "for good behavior," it also sets a self-imposed "deadline" (one more day; the son's wedding...), and it includes an implicit promise that the person will not ask for more if this one desire is granted.

For most, bargaining is a last ditch attempt to try to control life so that it will go our way. This phase of grief is often the briefest of all the stages. It is the final effort on the part of people to hold

on to what is important to them. Or if it has already been lost, then to find some way to ease the pain.

Sometimes a reprieve does happen...cancers do suddenly go into remission...illnesses take a turn for the better. The problem is that if people feel that such reprises are somehow related to their bargaining, it can set them up to repeat the stages of denial and anger and bargaining if things once again take a turn for the worse.

Anger

The reasons and targets of the anger during grief are as unique as the individual people and circumstances of those who find themselves on their own grief journey. They may be angry at themselves...at those who might be perceived as causing the death...or at someone who said or did something hurtful shortly after the death. They may even be mad at their loved one for dying and leaving them alone to deal with life without them. Often, their anger is directed toward God. Anger is a very human response to grief.

Anger often accompanies pain. When pain runs very deep, so does anger. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross was one of the first to articulate this truth. She described five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Anger is a normal part of grief.

Depression

Depression marks the breakdown of defenses in times of grief. The reality of the loss sinks in deeply. It surrounds, dominates, crushes.

- * Loss of appetite
- * Insomnia
- * Inability to enjoy anything
- * Anxious or restless behavior
- * Apathy
- * Preoccupation with thoughts of suicide
- * Wishing to be dead
- * Loss of interest in sex
- * Difficulty in concentration and making decisions
- * Poor memory
- * Irritability
- * Feelings of Worthlessness
- * Inability to cry even if one desperately needs or wants to

There is no "normal" time frame for depression. The sense of loss ebbs and flows over time. Furthermore, depression may reoccur when memories are rekindled by a song, a sight, etc. . The grief process is like a spiral that keeps coming back to the same feelings with varying degrees of intensity and for various lengths of time.

These feelings cannot be mitigated by urging the person to "cheer up." To deal with depression, one must be reconciled with the past. This includes developing a self-identity that is not rooted in what has been lost.

Guilt

If Only... What if...?

When a loved one dies, feelings of guilt are normal. Because of this fact, teenagers often experience extreme feelings of guilt or take on responsibility for the death in some way. Those who are grieving tend to blame themselves for something they did or didn't do that may have contributed to the death or for things they wish they did or didn't say or do. This is fairly common. Some bereaved, however, become tortured by their feelings of guilt and it colors their whole life. Guilt is a strong emotion which is often magnified because the bereaved are in an extremely vulnerable state. The guilt is often experienced when the bereaved try to answer the unanswerable: "Why did my loved one have to die?"

Most bereaved people feel some degree of guilt. No one can live close to another person and love deeply without hurting that person. Arguments are a part of family life, especially during adolescence. Everyone does and says things they later regret. When a loved one has died, they are reminded of those hurts and failings, real or imagined, of words they regret saying, incidents they'd like to forget, actions they'd like to take back

Guilt is usually not satisfied with explanations. Often people feel helpless with their guilt because there is little they can do to correct the situation. When people feel guilty justifiably and they are unable to be forgiven directly by the deceased, they may find some relief by talking with a trusted friend about their feelings of guilt.

Feelings of guilt, which are common in all grief, are often of major concern among survivors whose loved ones have died by suicide. "Could I have prevented it?" "Is it my fault?" "How did I fail?" Most survivors tell that their grief was complicated by extreme feelings of guilt. For some the guilt never goes away.

It is important for the bereaved to accept their guilt, however illogical, to understand it and to deal with it. Remember, we can't change the past. There is so much pain in grief that it is not helpful to continue to blame and accuse ourselves.

Acceptance / Hope

Hope emerges...that's the best way to describe it. It is so subtle that you might not be aware of its presence. You start to notice that your good days start outnumbering the bad which can have a dual effect. You may feel guilty for feeling good while at the same time you feel encouraged that you will get better. Things like shopping (which had been so painful before), painting the living room, looking forward to events, etc, all eventually become a part of your life again. You become more effective at work and home. You are able to make decisions and handle problems more easily. Slowly, your eating and sleeping habits return to normal. You begin to realize that you are moving forward, and you can once again enjoy life.