

Understanding Grief

Grief is our natural process of reaction and adjustment to loss and change. When we lose someone or something that is important to us, we grieve. There are many types of losses – loss of health, loss of employment, marital breakdown, divorce and death – and the reactions we have after a loss may be very different. Every significant loss challenges us to find ways of coping with the changes that absence brings.

This does not mean that we put the loss behind us, but we now have to adjust to a life without that person or thing that meant so much to us. For most of us the death of someone close will be the biggest loss we face. Your grieving process is to try to make sense of what has happened while learning to live your life without that person.

What to expect

We are all amateurs when it comes to grief and there is no right way to grieve. No two people's reactions will be the same, but these are some you might have.

Feelings

You may feel sad, numb, irritable, angry, relieved, guilty, lonely, depressed, frightened or helpless. These feelings can come and go and do not follow any particular order.

Physical symptoms

You may feel more tired than usual, yet find it hard to sleep. It is not unusual to have very vivid dreams. Your appetite may change and energy levels may be low. Your concentration may be low so that you are absentminded or have difficulty absorbing new information.

Thoughts

You might find you spend a lot of time thinking about the loss and the events leading up to it. It is normal to spend time thinking about 'if onlys' and how things might have been different. Many people find they think a lot about why it happened. Although you know the person has died, you may 'forget' it briefly, particularly when you wake up. You may imagine you see or have contact with the person who died. These thoughts can be overwhelming or frightening at times. The emotions and physical symptoms of grief can lead you to wonder if you are grieving the 'right' way or even if you are going mad.

Social changes

You may find you need time alone or you may feel a need to tell the story of your loss many times over. You may find you seek out people who can understand your need to talk and distance yourself from people who are uncomfortable with this. You may be disappointed and surprised at who can support you and who cannot.

Spiritual struggles

You may struggle with questions about the meaning of life, your relationship with God and your beliefs about what happens after death. Although it may be difficult to imagine in the early days of grief, as time goes on you will find resources and strength within yourself that you didn't know you had. Even as we struggle with grief, we can learn and grow with it.

The grief process

Many people experience a sense of shock and disbelief when a death occurs. You may appear to be coping well but often feel detached and almost in a dream. This initial reaction is a protective device that allows you to shut down in some ways as you prepare for what lies ahead. You may be surprised that the pain increases when this numbness begins to wear off and the reality of your loss begins to sink in. As the reality comes into focus so too does the pain of your loss. You begin to notice all that you have lost.

Grief does not happen in a set way. It is not like having the flu, where you feel very ill and then begin to feel a bit better until you finally return to being your old self again. The feelings and thoughts of grief come and go in waves. Sometimes you may feel you are coping quite well and then experience a burst of grief as you are reminded of your loss. It can be confusing to suddenly feel angry, for example, if you feel you have already 'gotten over' anger. It may help to remember that the thoughts and feelings will come and go as you try to come to terms with grief while also living your day-to-day life.

- Grief is a process and it takes time
- Everyone's grief is different and unique
- There is no right way to grieve
- Strong emotions and thoughts are part of grief

How long does grieving take?

There is no set time for grief. Grieving can be a lifetime adjustment, with some feelings coming back many times. You also find you feel a 'dip' around important dates such as anniversaries and birthdays. You will find that your grief is less intense and eases over time. That does not mean that you are over your grief but that you are finding a way to re-engage in life without the person that died.

Prolonged grief

While most people find their own way to cope with the support of family and friends, some people find they need professional support as they adjust.

Bereavement counselling may help you if:

- the death was unexpected, sudden or possibly avoidable,
- your relationship with the person who died was troubled or dependent,
- you do not feel you have enough support,
- you have a lot of other stress in your life, or
- you are finding it hard to adjust to change and loss.

What may help

- Seek out accurate information about grief and loss.
- Be patient and gentle with yourself as you grieve.
- Recognise the extent of your loss.
- Allow yourself to cope and to grieve in a way that suits you.
- Try to sleep well, eat well and take gentle exercise.
- Try not to make major or rash decisions while you grieve.
- Accept emotional and practical support from friends and family.

- Get professional help if you are finding it too difficult.