

# **Grief: A Personal Journey**

## **Ten Things to Know About Grief Dealing with Grief**

Content courtesy of the Victoria Hospice Society

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## **Grief...**

### **A Personal Journey**

When someone important to you dies, you grieve. This means that you may experience a wide range of responses, often over an extended period of time. The following three sections generally coincide with early, middle and later grief, though variation and overlap of these phases is common.

#### **When a death occurs**

##### ***Walking the Edges***

In the beginning phase of grief, you come to accept the reality of the death. The loss and your grief are your primary experience at this time. You may experience a sense of unreality. You may be shocked at the news of the death and feel bewildered or stunned. This may be a time when you need care and assistance with practical tasks. You know intellectually that the death has occurred but may find that you have moments of denial when you think or feel as if it has not really happened. Denial is nature's way of giving you breaks from hard truths. You are able to take things in at your own pace. To know in your heart and in your experience that the person is gone takes time. Numbness may allow you to do the things that are necessary, such as making arrangements for the funeral, informing others of the death, etc. People may interpret this as strength and coping and be surprised when you do express feelings of distress.

#### **Adjusting to loss**

##### ***Entering the Depths***

The middle phase of grief may last for an extended time, with good days and bad days, episodes of intense grief and times when you are feeling more like your usual self. Some people describe their grief as coming in waves. Others think of their good days as 'holidays from grief'. Your grief is a central focus in your life at this time. This is the phase in which you are coming to terms with the meaning of this loss in your life. You may be reviewing your relationship with the person who died, throughout the time you knew each other. You will think about all the ups and downs, and may experience feelings of regret or guilt. Your personal responses to the loss may include a range of emotions such as anger, depression, and loneliness. The intensity of these feelings can be unexpected and overwhelming. Your values, beliefs or faith may be challenged by the ways in which your world has changed. It is beneficial to find ways to express and sort through these responses. Talking to a trusted person, keeping a journal, working on albums or family histories, finding safe outlets for emotions, and attending to taking care of yourself are some positive ways to help yourself. Emotional pain can bring physical distress. This pain is real, not imagined, as your body is reacting to your emotions. Heartache is a very real sensation. Chest pain is quite common among bereaved people. You may find that your normal patterns of eating and sleeping are altered. Any problems or worries should be checked with your doctor. Make sure that your doctor knows about your bereavement so that he or she can advise you appropriately. This is a time when your social support network may be changing. People may expect you to feel better than you do. You may not find the support that you want. The company of other bereaved people may be very comforting to you as they can understand much of your experience.

#### **As life goes on**

##### ***Mending the Heart***

At some point in your grief, you will be aware that your loss is becoming a part of your past experience. You may feel some pangs of guilt that your life is continuing to move forward. It is helpful at this time to review how far you have come since the death occurred and to recall your earlier experiences of grief. The good days outnumber the bad days more and more. Mostly, you are able to remember things about the person with a sense of comfort. Your grief is not over, as there very likely will be times when you will intensely miss the person who died. These times may be related to significant life events which you would have shared with them. It is important to be able to find meaningful ways to include the person who died as an important part of your life now. You need ways to remember and honour them and to talk about them in a natural and comfortable way. This may be a time of personal integration when you re-evaluate your life and make significant personal choices that enhance the quality of your life. You may want to acknowledge the personal growth that has come as a result of surviving, and continuing to survive, this loss.

## Metaphors for grief

Both the labyrinth and a journey are used here as metaphors for grief. Grief may be compared to a journey, a road that we must travel between how things were and how they will be. The labyrinth is an ancient image of an interior journey that moves inward to central issues of meaning; it is an image of wholeness. The labyrinth journey is a metaphor for grief as there is only one way to go – forward. Despite the many twists and turns, even when the next part of the journey cannot be seen, the way is onward. There are no dead ends and wrong turnings. The way leads to the centre and then returns. Grief is also like any significant journey, for the traveller is changed by their experiences along the way and the once familiar world is different on the traveller's return.

## Personal experiences of grief

Grief is the natural variety of responses that you experience when someone important to you dies. It affects you in many ways: socially, physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. The death of someone important upsets your relationships, your daily life, and your ideas about how the world works. Grief is the process by which you cope with the significance of this loss, begin to adjust to the changes in your life and make some order out of the chaos that has resulted from this death. Each of you has particular strengths and coping mechanisms that have helped you to deal with other times of distress. You have a network of family, friends and acquaintances on which you count for help and support. Most often these resources will be sufficient to sustain and encourage you through your grief. Your experience of grief will be influenced by your personal, familial and cultural style and your relationship with the person who died. You may be aware that this current grief feels quite different from another grief that you have experienced. The effect and meaning of this loss is unique.

Grief may be somewhat familiar, or it may be a new, uncertain endeavour. It is not an easy journey and there may be times when you want more support than is available through your social network.

## Ten Things to Know About Grief

When you are grieving it helps to know what to expect. Although your grief is unique to your relationship with the person who died, there are some common themes. Our staff, volunteers, and bereaved people identified the ten things discussed below as important in understanding your grief.

### Global effect of loss

The death of someone very close to you can be a life transforming event that affects all aspects of yourself and your life. It can feel as if your world has been shattered. The grief process is the journey between how things were and how they will be. It is an interior journey, like a labyrinth, moving toward central issues of meaning.

### Grief is a natural process

The grief you feel at the death of someone important to you is the consequence of living and loving, of your meaningful connections with others. Grief is a normal part of life and a natural response to loss. Information about the phases of grief can help you to understand the responses that you experience.

### Individual differences in grieving styles

Although grief has some definable outlines, how you grieve is a unique result of your personality, your past history of loss, and the relationship that you had with the person who died. Each person in your family will grieve in their own way and with their own timetable. To cope with their grief, some people will openly express the emotions that they experience while others will control their thoughts and emotions. Neither of these styles is right or wrong; each can be an effective way through grief.

## **Children and grief**

Children look to the important adults in their lives to learn how to grieve. They are sensitive to the moods and behaviour of the adults around them and will not talk about their thoughts and feelings of loss unless the adults do. Children are frightened by what they do not know or understand, so simple information about death and grief is helpful to them.

## **Social connections and support**

When you are grieving you want and need support from others now more than ever. Due to awkwardness or their own feelings of grief, some people may not be able to provide the understanding and caring that you expected from them. Because all of the relationships in your life will be altered in some way after a major loss, it is normal to look at, change or, sometimes, end certain relationships. You may find that the company of other bereaved people is particularly comforting.

## **Experiences you might have in grief**

When you are actively grieving, you can feel very different from your usual self as your emotions, your mind, and your reactions seem unreliable. It is possible that you are feeling intense pain and emotions that you have never felt before. You are not going crazy; this is a natural part of grief. Responses such as fatigue, forgetfulness and irritability result from your attention and energy being directed toward your grief and adjustment to loss.

## **Fluctuations in the grief process**

As you journey along the path of grief, you will find that your feelings and responses vary at different times and phases of the process. There will be unpredictable ups and downs that may be felt as waves of grief or as good days and bad days. It is important to understand and value the good days as breaks or rests in your particular journey.

## **Self-care and what helps**

There are things that you can do to help yourself at this challenging time. Getting information about grief can help you to understand your responses and your journey. Be gentle and patient with yourself as you grieve. Do what you can to keep some normal routine for health and social contact. Support may come from a variety of sources: family, friends, bereavement groups, chat rooms, etc. If you are concerned about yourself and your grief, seek professional counselling help.

## **Time for grief**

Despite what you may hear about 'getting over it' or 'the first year', there are no time lines for grief; it takes as long as it takes. Often your grief journey is longer than you or other people expected and you may feel pressure to be better than you are by now, whenever this is. It is certain that this loss will continue to be part of your life and that you will always have times when you think about, miss, and grieve for the person who died.

## **Grief as a spiritual journey of healing**

The death of someone significant in your life brings change that puts you on a different life path. Nothing will ever be the same, yet you must somehow go on and find meaning in the new path before you. As the journey continues, you may experience healing and personal growth as a result of the suffering you have endured and the lessons that you have learned about what you truly value.

## When a death occurs

### *Walking the Edges*

#### **Social**

Withdrawal from others

Unrealistic expectations of self and others

Poor judgement about relationships

#### **Physical**

Shortness of breath and palpitations

Digestive upsets

Low energy, weakness and restlessness

#### **Emotional**

Crying, sobbing and wailing

Indifference and emptiness

Outrage and helplessness

#### **Mental**

Confusion, forgetfulness and poor concentration

Denial and daydreaming

Constant thoughts about the person who died and/or the death

#### **Spiritual**

Blaming God or life

Lack of meaning, direction or hope

Wanting to die or join the person who died

#### **What Helps**

- To pace yourself moment to moment
- To make no unnecessary changes
- To talk about the person and the death
- To use practical and emotional supports

## Adjusting to loss

### *Entering the Depths*

#### **Social**

Rushing into new relationships

Wanting company but unable to ask

Continued withdrawal and isolation

Self-consciousness

#### **Physical**

Changes in appetite and sleep patterns

Shortness of breath and palpitations

Digestive upsets

#### **Emotional**

Intense and conflicting emotions

Magnified fear for self or others

Anger, sadness, guilt, depression

**Mental**

Sense of going crazy

Memory problems

Difficult to concentrate/understand

Vivid dreams or nightmares

**Spiritual**

Trying to contact the person who died

Sensing the presence of the person who died; visitations

Continued lack of meaning

**What Helps**

- To recognize and express emotions
- To acknowledge changes
- To understand grief and know others experience similar responses

**As life goes on*****Mending the Heart*****Social**

More interest in daily affairs of self/others

Ability to reach out and meet others

Energy for social visits and events

**Physical**

Physical symptoms subside

Sleep pattern and appetites are more settled

Gut-wrenching emptiness lightens

**Emotional**

Emotions are less intense

Feeling of coming out of the fog

More peace; less guilt

**Mental**

Increased perspective about the death

Ability to remember with less pain

Improved concentration and memory

Dreams and nightmares decrease

**Spiritual**

Reconnection with religious/spiritual beliefs

Life has new meaning and purpose

Acceptance of death as part of life cycle

**What Helps**

- To reflect on progress since the death
- To begin envisioning a future
- To engage in new activities
- To establish new roles and relationships



We have chosen the image of the labyrinth as a metaphor for the journey through grief. A labyrinth is not a maze as there are no dead ends and no wrong turnings. There is only one way – forward. So it is with grief. The only way through is forward, with many turns and going back and forth over what seems like the same territory. We journey to the centre of our grief, to the centre of ourselves, and then slowly return to re-enter the world.

Each person's experience on the journey of grief will be different. This is a reflection of our personal style, our relationship with the person who died, our internal and social resources, and our past history of coping. As you journey through your own grief process, there will likely be unexpected turns and insights.