

Grief: Understanding Your Emotions

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When someone close to you dies, you grieve for them. Your grief is the journey from how things were to how things will be. In this journey, you may experience powerful and possibly unfamiliar emotions.

These emotions are part of the natural process of grief. Remember that an emotion is neither good or bad, nor right or wrong, it is just an emotion. Emotions are not rational, but they are very real responses. You feel emotions in your solar plexus, your gut and your heart. This is why expressions like 'heart-felt', 'butterflies in my stomach' and 'gut-wrenching' are common. Emotions or feelings can be uncomfortable but they are not harmful.

You may not be used to feeling the amount of emotion that your grief has triggered. Some manifestations of emotions, such as tears, sighing, or nervous irritation, may be distressing and embarrassing to you. You may also experience deep feeling without outward expression.

In the normal process of grief, you will work through emotions in layers. Perhaps you hope that once you experience an emotion, it is over. Then the next layer shows up. You are not back where you were but facing a new level of the same emotion.

You might try to control or suppress your feelings with varying degrees of success. You can learn to work with your emotions, at least to some degree, so that you are not entirely at their mercy. To begin, take things a little at a time and deal with each emotion as it comes. Let yourself be in the experience, be curious about it, attend to what it is like in detail, and allow the feeling to move through you and out. With practice, you can choose where, when, and for how long to feel your emotions. They become something you journey with rather than wish to avoid.

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Sorrow

Some other words that you might use to describe sorrow include sadness, emptiness, loneliness, and longing. Sorrow is hard to put into words as words never really match your feeling or its depth. It is also hard to talk about as other people may not be comfortable hearing about your pain. When you do not feel connected or understood, you may feel alone even in the presence of others.

Sorrow is your sadness for the loss itself. It may be expressed through weeping and crying. Expression of your sorrow may include sobbing and wailing also. The pain of sorrow is heartache. You might say that your heart is broken or that you feel wounded – like being half a person.

Your sorrow is related to the companionship and relationship that you are missing and to the love and connection you felt with the person. You may want the person back, want the relationship to continue, want someone to love and care for who loves you in return. Because you are missing the sharing of daily experiences and the intimate knowing of a close loved one, you may feel like you don't belong anywhere properly.

These aspects of sorrow can build on each other and you may be afraid to start crying in case you never stop.

What Helps:

Honour your sadness

This is a natural part of experiencing your loss. Give yourself permission to include grief as part of your life right now. Balance feeling the sadness with doing the things that need doing.

Share your experiences

Find people with whom you can be sad. The company of other bereaved people may be comforting as you can assume that they will have some similar experiences and understanding.

Express your sorrow

It may be helpful to have a regular time and place to allow yourself to be sad and to weep, such as in your morning shower, at the grave side, or sitting on a memorial bench. Evening is not a good time for this as deep emotion can disturb your sleep.

Create ways of remembering

Find meaningful yet realistic ways to keep the person who died in your life. Talk to him, celebrate her birthday, put up a Christmas stocking, keep his pictures out, talk about her. You will find what feels natural and positive for you.

The other side of sorrow

In 'The Prophet', Kahlil Gibran says "Your joy is your sorrow unmasked." Once the harder part of sadness is done, there comes a sweetness in which you are able to recall the good times. Memories bring a sense of loving and being loved.

Hopelessness and Despair

Hopelessness, despair, meaninglessness and void are words used to describe the feelings that can emerge as you face the changes in your life that result from your loss. It may be that everything is different, or that all you held dear and true about love or life has disintegrated. You may experience fear and lack of confidence about the future.

This is the central pain of grief. As sadness empties out of you, then hopelessness and despair arise. You may feel there is 'no light at the end of the tunnel.' Other images that people have used to describe their hopelessness are: a forest after a forest fire, a barren desert, and the dark night of the soul or an abyss.

You may not be able to find the courage to put your feelings into words when you can't believe in a future or you have ambivalence about it. Your grief may not be the way you thought it would be. Perhaps you never thought you would feel this way. If you see no point in going on and it's hard to find a purpose, you wonder how you can go on living in these circumstances. Depression, suicidal thoughts, or a longing to have life be over may plague you now.

Hopelessness and despair can come at moments along the way or be a significant portion of your grief journey. These feelings are related to depression and you and others might call it that. In grief, your mood is variable and you have a range of emotions, for example, you have moments when you can laugh. In clinical depression, your mood is consistently low and you are emotionally flat.

Your fear may be that it will always be this way, but this is an in-between time – a still place or a transition – in which you integrate what has been with what is now. The stillness or emptiness allows you to move into what is to come.

What Helps:

Share your ambivalence

If you are uncertain about how to go on, seek help from your doctor, counsellor or spiritual advisor.

Let others know and help

If you can, spend time with the generations of your family. Identify people who have been through this and survived. These may be people in your own social network or characters in books and movies.

Value this time

This is a time of transition and change. Allow yourself to reflect on where you have been and where you might be heading. Imagine that a seed has been planted in the ground; in the dark, it is preparing to grow.

Nurture yourself

Pray or meditate regularly. Spend quiet time in nature and allow the beauty of the world to touch you. Notice the continuation of life's cycles. You may find it helps to keep a journal or to record your progress in some way. Remember to value your small accomplishments.

The other side of hopelessness

Recognition of the natural cycles of life can bring you an acceptance of yourself and your process. Being in touch with the beauty of the world can bring peace. May Sarton wrote, "Help us to be the always hopeful gardeners of the spirit who know that without darkness nothing comes to birth as without light nothing flowers." (The Book of Virtues)

Guilt

Most grieving people experience some feelings of guilt. To question yourself and your experience is part of being human. You may feel responsible, whether this is rational or not. Your own perfectionism or your personal history may magnify your sense of guilt.

You are trying to make meaning of something tragic and painful. Guilt arises from the belief that there must be a reason for everything that happens. When you are unable to find reasons, you might blame yourself as this seems better than having no explanation. Guilt also arises from a vulnerable, self-critical point of view and feelings of helplessness in not being able to change things then or now.

It is natural in grief to relive what happened, especially your part in it, and to ask questions like 'what if?' or 'why?' and to wonder 'if only.' You may have regrets about things done and not done, or said and not said. This can trap you in a downward spiral that feels so powerful and so real.

You may experience legitimate guilt related to things you really are responsible for. There may have been some omission, mistake, or action that resulted in the pain, illness or death. It may be something as ordinary as being a caregiver who was exhausted, lost patience, and was cranky. It may be something as terrible as having been the driver in a fatal car accident. If you had an ambivalent relationship with the person who died, you may have wished him dead or harboured ill will against her.

Your guilt may be based in negative judgements of yourself and your perfectionism. You may have judgements about how you are grieving, for example, you may feel guilty about the euphoria or relief you felt at the time of the death. You may tell yourself 'if I were a better person – bad things wouldn't happen – I would never make a mistake – I wouldn't feel so bad – I wouldn't be weak and grieving.' Feelings of guilt are often related to ideas about how you **should** be. Perhaps you tell yourself that you should be strong, should remember the good times and be happy, and should not feel sad. Often these 'should's are echoed in the advice of your family and social circle.

What Helps:

Examine your guilt

Pay attention to what you say to yourself and about yourself. Describe what you feel guilty about and examine it. Look at what you are guilty of – the real part – and decide what you need to do about this.

Forgive yourself

Guilt can feel like glue, holding you in an uncomfortable place.

Forgiveness is the solvent that loosens this up. Practice self-forgiveness by identifying what you can forgive yourself for and what parts of your guilt you can let go of. There may be parts that you are not ready to let go of yet.

Get a reality check

Talk to a trusted person for a reality check. This may help you to separate the real from the groundless guilt.

Take action

You may need to do penance for things you judge yourself guilty of. Consider making amends rather than punishing yourself and remember once the price is paid, that's it. How could you pay the price? – Perhaps through charitable works, positive action, or a change in behaviour. Plan what needs to happen, what action or steps you need to take or which person you need to talk to.

Repeat the above as necessary

It is useful to review your guilt, sorting and letting go as you are ready. The other side of guilt; honour your guilt as a teacher of what you believe is right and wrong. In searching for meaning in the midst of your grief, you learn what you want to hold onto and value. You find that you grow through this experience.

Anger

Anger is a natural reaction to frustration, powerlessness, or injustice. Angry feelings are a natural and healthy response to loss. However, anger is a difficult emotion to accept as it can be powerful and menacing, for you and for others.

Socially acceptable ways to express anger are hard to find as it is not 'nice' to be angry. You may have other words for anger, saying 'I'm upset, frustrated, annoyed, cross, or disappointed.'

Your anger may be justifiable anger. It may have a target. There may be valid reasons for your anger, such as things done or not done, said or not said, by others involved in the care of the person who died or at the time of the death. Your anger may be self-directed and related to your feelings of guilt.

You may experience anger without a target or you may not want to acknowledge the target of your anger if, for example, you are angry at the person who died. This can cause free floating anger that comes from an internal pressure of intense feelings. You may find it hard to recognize as anger, yet it may show up everywhere and come out in all sorts of distressing ways. You may switch feelings (so that you cry), hold silent grudges (then worry and feel guilty), or explode without warning (overreact).

Sometimes you may use anger as a distraction or protection from feelings that you fear may overwhelm you. This is not wrong – it's just a way to have control. Anger may mask a deep emotion, hurt or injury that you are not prepared to address.

What Helps:

Be Safe

Take care of yourself and protect others, so that your anger does not become harmful. Learn and practise anger management. Take time out when you feel that you might lose control. Time out means walking away, literally, from whatever the situation is - immediately. Say when you will return. You may only need a short time to calm yourself.

Defuse your anger

Let the steam off. Physical activity that includes big muscle movement helps. Sports, such as racket sports, running, or aerobics, are a beneficial release. Repetitive actions are good: hammering, digging in the garden, cooking or baking that require chopping, kneading, or pounding. Find activities in your daily routine that help defuse your anger.

Express the feelings

In a safe place, with no judgement, talk out the whole story. Write it or draw it, if this works better for you. Examine the details and name your feelings. Express these feelings through safe outlets. In an unsent letter, or in an 'empty chair' or taped conversation, you can talk to the person you are angry at, and say what you really feel and think. You can destroy the letter or tape afterwards. This process may put things back in perspective and help you to decide if there are things you need or want to do.

Take action

Identify positive steps you can take to redress any wrong you perceive has been done. These might be actual or symbolic actions. For example, you might forward suggestions to someone about how your situation could have been handled better, or you might work to make changes through community service.

Relieve your tension

Take care of yourself through relaxation; get a massage or spa treatment. Practise prayer or meditation. Talk to people who care about you and are able to hear about your struggles.

The other side of anger

Within your anger, there is energy for positive action. It arises from the same source as initiative. Personal change and growth require dynamic energy.

Fear and Anxiety

Fear and anxiety are very powerful physical sensations which can include rapid shallow breathing, nervousness and agitation, upset stomach, and heart palpitations. Usually, fear is telling you to avoid or get away from some danger, but when you are grieving you may get this signal without any real danger present. Your fear may be about the future rather than the present. Fear, anxiety and especially panic are felt in your body.

If you fear being unable to cope, not knowing how to go on, or what life will be like, you may not want to go out or face new things and new people. You may feel panicked or paralyzed. If you have too much to deal with, your fear can become generalized into nameless dread. An accumulation of fear and stress creates chronic anxiety and possibly panic attacks.

You may be afraid of the intensity of your own emotions and wonder if you are going crazy. You worry about loss of control, thinking that if you begin to express emotion you won't be able to stop.

Your fear may centre on certain persistent thoughts or memories related to the illness or death. This can be a dilemma as you avoid these memories yet fear that they may be all you have. As you move through your grief process, you will reclaim all your memories again.

It is quite common to fear illness and dying, for yourself and other family members, due to your heightened sense of mortality and sensitivity to symptoms.

What Helps:

Name your fear

Stop and focus on your fear or anxiety. This is the beginning of being able to manage them. Explore what causes these feelings for you. A helpful saying: to name it is to tame it. Get information about whatever causes your fear, as knowledge gives you power. If you are suffering from anxiety or panic attacks, ask your doctor for help and advice.

Use problem solving strategies

Start by asking questions like: what do I need to do now? What can I tackle later? Who can help and what can they do? What resources do I have? Think small and organize things into bite size pieces. Review this process to identify what you learned and can use again. As you begin to take some control, you find that your fears begin to lift.

Identify what soothes your anxiety

Notice what increases and decreases your anxiety – does it help to be alone, with others? Use positive self-talk, for example, 'My body is responding to an emergency, and there is NO emergency. I am safe.' Make a list of what to do when you feel panicky, what helps, for example: call a designated friend; be active – go for a walk, clean the house, exercise; hang onto something – a pillow, teddy bear, an article of clothing belonging to the person who died; do something soothing – a bath, massage, yoga; practice prayer, meditation or visualization.

Breathe slowly, exhale

Let the sensations of fear or anxiety remind you to breathe, slowly and fully. Take a big breath in and let it out with a sigh.

The other side of fear and anxiety

You are responding to change and ready for the challenge. There is a similarity between being anxious and being excited – heart rate up, sweating palms, dry mouth, stomach churning. Rather than tell yourself 'I am afraid', say 'I am ready.' Fear is an indicator of being at your edge, where growth can happen.

Summary

Practise the strategies for coping that are given for the particular emotions. Look at the positive side of each emotion to balance its challenging aspects. There is hope for the healing of your pain and for your journey to bring you to a place of composure again.



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.