

Facing Grief

We all face numerous losses throughout our lives. When the loss is the death of someone close to us or someone we care about - a family member, friend, neighbor, or colleague/co-worker - the loss can trigger a grieving process that can affect our way of living.

This handout is designed to help you better understand and cope when someone close to you dies. This is also a guide on ways to balance your own personal needs to heal and recover with the potential demands and expectations of being at work.

The Grieving Process

Grief is a natural and normal response to loss. Although grieving the death of someone is a normal reaction, at times grief can feel enormously painful, overwhelming, and exhausting. Beginning to understand your grieving experience, and taking gradual steps to address your pain and loss, can be important and integral components of recovering from your grief.

Stages of Grief

Within the first few weeks to months after a death, you may find yourself riding on a roller coaster of shifting emotions. Most people go through these stages not in linear steps, but in unpredictable waves-- moving through one stage to the next and sometimes shifting back. Some people will also experience certain phases but not others. Here are several common, typical grief reactions:

- **Shock/Disbelief:** This is the numbing, disorienting sense that the death has not really happened. This reaction can be intensified and complicated if the death is sudden, violent, or unanticipated. Your mind may be telling you "there must be some mistake," or "this can't be true." These symptoms typically last from several hours to several days.
- **Anger:** Your anger may be targeted at a number of sources – doctors who treated your loved one, anger at your family members for not rallying together, anger at the injustice of it, or even anger at yourself or the person who died and "left" you.
- **Guilt:** You may blame yourself for not doing more, not being there enough or not being there when the death happened. You may feel regret over "unfinished business" - conflicts you and the deceased never resolved, or feelings between the two of you that were never fully discussed or shared.

- **Sadness:** You may experience a deep sense of loss. There may be moments when you find yourself at a loss for words, weeping, or bursting uncontrollably into tears.
- **Fear:** There may be anxiety, panic or fears about carrying on and the future. If the person who died was an adult (partner, sibling, parent), it may bring up fears about your own sense of mortality or sense of being left behind.
- **Depression:** You may go through periods of melancholy, or "blueness," where you feel inclined to withdraw or isolate yourself. You may lose interest in your usual activities, or feel helpless or hopeless.

In addition to these stages, people who are grieving frequently experience physical symptoms, such as fatigue, sleep disruption, appetite changes, increased tension and numerous aches and pains. Grief can also affect you on a psychological level. Some of these common signs include feeling distracted, forgetful, irritable, disoriented, or confused.

Tasks of Mourning

In healthy grieving, mourning and completing one's grief come in several stages. The first is to accept and fully experience your loss, including feeling and expressing your pain and sorrow. Second, is to let go of your attachment to your loved one and accompanying grief. Third, is to start to form new relationships or attachments in your life. This third phase is where you feel you are moving through healing and recovery, and can start to develop new commitments and ties to people and activities.

What you need during grief

Grieving the death of someone does not have a particular timetable. Mourning your loss may take from weeks or even years. For many individuals, the death of their loved one is carried with them throughout their lives. Although there is no "cure" for grief, there are several ways to help you cope with your loss, and begin to ease the pain.

- **Time:** Take time alone and with others whom you trust and who will listen when you need to talk.
- **Caring:** Try to allow yourself to accept the expressions of caring from others, even though they may be awkward. Helping a friend or relative suffering the same loss may bring a feeling of closeness with that person.

- **Rest, Relaxation, Exercise and Diversions:** You may need to give yourself extra amounts of things that nourish and replenish you. Hot baths, afternoon naps, a short trip, a project helping others -- any of these may give you a lift. Grief can be an emotionally and physically exhausting process.
- **Goals:** For a while, it will seem that much of life is without meaning. At times like these, small goals are helpful and may give you something to look forward to - lunch with a friend that day, a movie the next week, a trip next month. It helps give you something immediate to work through. Sometimes living moment by moment, or one day at a time, is the rule of thumb.
- **Security:** Try to reduce or find help for financial and other stresses in your life. Allow yourself to be close and open up to those you trust. Developing or getting back into a routine helps. Focus on doing things at your own pace.
- **Permission to Backslide:** Sometimes after a period of feeling better, you find yourself back in the old feelings of extreme sadness, despair or anger. This is the nature of grief; one moment you're up, and next, you're down. Sometimes when you backslide, you are remembering, re-experiencing the trauma or enormity of your loss which starts to flood back and overwhelm you.
- **Hope:** You may find hope and comfort from those who have experienced a similar loss. Knowing what helped them, and realizing that over time they have recovered, may give you the hope and strength to envision that you, too, will eventually heal from your grief.
- **Small Pleasures:** Do not underestimate the healing power of small pleasures. Sunsets, massage, a walk near the ocean, a favorite food – all are small steps toward giving to yourself and regaining your pleasure in life itself.
- **Be aware of drug and alcohol use:** The use of drugs, alcohol, and even prescription medications may prolong and delay the necessary process of grieving. You cannot prevent or cure grief.
- **Permission to change your mind:** Grieving can shake you up inside. You may have difficulty concentrating; find yourself constantly reevaluating your priorities, uncertain what you want in numerous aspects of your life. When you make commitments or plans, be sure to let people know you may need room to cancel or change your mind.

- **Be prepared around holidays and anniversaries:** For many people, holidays, birthdays or the anniversary of their loved one's death can bring up painful memories or revive feelings of longing and sadness over their loss - even for those who believe they have "finished" their grieving and moved on.

This "anniversary" reaction is a common part of the grieving process, but you may be still be surprised by the flood of emotions that may be reactivated during this period. You might want to be especially aware and gentle with yourself around this time, allowing more private time for yourself or arranging to spend more time around family and others close to you.

In many instances, people can move through their grief on their own, or with their existing supports and resources. However, sometimes you need outside help or assistance to keep yourself from "going under," or getting "perpetually stuck" in your grief.

These conditions can happen especially if you are experiencing multiple stressors, or coping with cumulative grief. These warning signs include continuing bouts of depression, social withdrawal and isolation, suicidal thoughts, or continuing feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and despair.

Employee Assistance staff are available to meet with employees or family members who are experiencing difficulties. Call for a free, confidential appointment at 510-643-7754