

# Living through Grief

This is the first of the six publications in the grief information series. Each publication addresses specific issues bereaved people may encounter on their journey through grief. Future publications include Feelings of Grief; Coping with grief; Different Bonds, Different Grief; After the First Year; and Coping with the holidays.

## **What is Grief?**

The goal of What Is Grief? Is to introduce you to the idea that grief is a process that takes time. Individuals experience grief in their own way and at their own pace.

## **The Four Guidelines**

Here are many thoughts and ideas on how people grieve. If you read nothing else about grief keep these four rules in mind and share them with family and friends.

### **Grief has no timetable**

In spite of what family and friends may say, you may not be over your loss in three months, six months. Twelve months or longer.

### **Grief is different for each person who experiences it.**

Because no two relationships are exactly alike, no two people grieve exactly alike. For example. The experience of losing a spouse or partner is different from that of losing a parent. Even when two people lose the same grandparent, their experience of that loss can be very different.

### **You have to experience your loss before you can move on.**

You cannot go around it, over it, above it, or beside it. The only way to deal with the loss is to feel it, experience it and go through it. Running away from your thoughts and feelings by always being busy or "keeping a stiff upper lip" can actually make your loss more difficult in the long run.

## **Be patient with yourself**

Grief is a journey with many peaks and valleys. At times the road to recovery can seem endless. Take each minute and hour at a time.

## **Moving through Grief**

Grief is a natural reaction to a loss of any kind. It is a journey of experiences and feeling in response to your loss. Grief can be a long and difficult journey. You will not finish this journey overnight, despite what you might wish. To successfully move through your grief, it is helpful for you to take an active role in your own healing process. Each part of the journey is described below.

1. **You react to your loss with shock, numbness and disbelief.** When you experience a trauma, one of your first reactions is to shut down or go numb. This cushions you from overwhelming feelings during your early grief. You may feel as if you are on "automatic pilot". Even an expected death is a shock. You cannot know how a loss is going to feel until it actually occurs. A part of you may feel that the loss is unreal, a nightmare, or as a terrible mistake. How long it will take you to come out of your numbness depends on the circumstances surrounding the loss.
2. **You begin the difficult journey of understanding that your loss is real.** As the numbness wears off, you begin to realize what the loss is going to mean to you. This explains why many bereaved people feel worse after a few months have gone by. The realness of this loss starts to sink in. A part of you may still be looking for your loved one to come back into your life. You begin some of your hardest grieving when the support you got right after the death tapers off.
3. **You allow yourself to experience the pain of your grief in all of its forms.** There are no shortcuts through the pain of loss. You can try to "stuff down" feelings and delay grieving, but the grief will not lessen until you experience it fully. In our society, where showing pain is considered by many people to be a sign of weakness, it is important to give yourself permission to talk about and feel your pain. Pain is also expressed through your physical body. It is common to have strong physical reactions to grief. Because of the stress you have been under, it may be a good idea to get a physical exam in order to relieve fears about your own health.
4. **You realize how your life has changed and you begin to develop new roles, routines and skills in response to the changes.** Loss can destroy daily routines. It can rob you of your life you once had. Your responsibilities may seem to have doubled overnight. Grieving the loss of your routines is an important part of healing. It is helpful to make as few changes as possible elsewhere in your life, when you are faced with a loss. It is also important to be gentle and patient with yourself as you assume new roles and responsibilities.

5. **You eventually come to a time when you chose to say “Yes” to life again.**  
Grieving can be terribly hard, exhausting work, and can demand much of your energy. When enough healing has occurred, you no longer need to focus as much of your energy on your loss. At this point, you find you have more energy to invest in the life ahead of you. You come to understand that it is possible for you to have a happy and full life again, though it will be different from your life before your loss.

### **Thoughts to Remember**

People who are grieving are often expected to “get over” their loss too quickly. **Be gentle with yourself during the many ups and downs.**

Loss is different for each person, yet there is much you will have in common with others. **Beware of putting expectations on yourself, spouse or partner, and others.**

Tears are healthy and acceptable as you feel the pain after the death of your loved one. **Cry freely and do not apologize for tears.**

Grief affects your eating and sleeping, your energy level and your ability to concentrate. **A good diet, plenty of liquids, physical exercise and rest are especially important during this time.**

**Using alcohol and pills to calm you can cloud your thinking and slow down the bereavement process.** Use these medications as little as possible and only under a doctor's supervision.

Friends and relatives may avoid you and avoid talking about the death of your loved one. Let them know you need to talk about your loved one and that it helps to talk. **Share with them as you can.**

**Think about delaying major decisions for at least a year** (changing jobs or moving, another pregnancy, etc.)

**Keep your loved one's clothes and other belongings until you are ready to decide what you want to do.** You need time to make good decisions about these things.

Suicidal thoughts may occur and are normal. The meaning in life will return in time. The pain does lessen. **Talk about your thoughts with a trusted friend.**

However, if they persist or become stronger, it is important to seek help from a counselor.

**Include your children in your grief.** Do not hide your tears from them, but be open and honest about your own feelings. They too, are grieving and need to express their feelings. They need to be included and feel your love. You may find it helpful to find a close family member who can supply what you are not able to give your young children at this time.

Holiday and anniversary times are reminders of your empty arms. **Plan ahead to avoid some of the added stress. Do not expect others to remember or be sensitive to how you feel.** Lower expectations of yourself. Take time for your needs.

### **Symptoms of Grief**

The loss of a loved one can affect all areas of your life. Over the next several months you may experience a few or many of the symptoms below.

#### Physical

Change in appetite/ weight, upset stomach, problems with sleep, tiredness, headaches, tense and achy muscles

#### Emotional

Sense of disbelief, numbness, inability to concentrate, guilt, anger, loneliness, panic, confusion, depression

#### Social/Spiritual

Lack of interest in hobbies or activities, less interest in participating in family get-togethers or social events, loss of faith, lack of interest in your job

If many of these symptoms persist well beyond a year you may be "stuck" in your grief process. Counseling might help you get back on track.

#### Suggested Reading List

The Courage to Grieve

by Judy Tatelbaum.

Lippincott & Crowell. 1980

How to Go On Living When a Loved One Has Died  
by Therese Rando. Lexington Books 1988

Remembering With Love  
by Elizabeth Leaving, Fairview Press, 1992

Living When A Loved One Has Died  
by Earl Grollman. Beacon Press, 1977

Safe Passage  
by Molly Fumia, Conari Press, 1992.