



GRIEF AND LOSS

What is Grief?

Grief is a normal and natural response to loss. When you love someone, you inevitably experience pain and grief when that love is lost. Grief is experienced in all major aspects of your life, impacting your thoughts and feelings, your behavior with others, and your physical health. Grief is an ongoing process with many changes over time. It is different and unique for each individual, for each type of loss, and at each point in the grief process. In addition, many different types of loss can trigger grief. Though you may expect to grieve the death of a family member or close friend, other significant losses such as a divorce or breakup of a relationship, moving to a new location, or the death of a pet may also need to be grieved.

How do we Grieve?

"You should be strong." "You have to get on with your life" "Don't wallow in self-pity." These common but inappropriate responses to grief reflect the fact that our society has not taught people how to grieve well and, as a result, many of us don't appreciate the reason for grieving and the process of grieving. When we lose a significant relationship, we must go through a process of adapting to that loss. Therese Rando in the book *How to Go On Living When Someone you Love Dies* discusses how grief work is necessary to enable you to move beyond the loss and make the changes required to accommodate the loss. "The purpose of grief and mourning is to get to the point where you can live with the loss healthily, after having made the necessary changes to do so."

Grief is an ongoing process. A common myth concerning grief is that there are a series of stages that everyone goes through in a particular order. While this is not true, there are main categories of responses that most people experience. These tasks or phases of mourning are fluid and experienced differently by different people and with different types of losses.

1. "This can't be true." The first reaction many people have, particularly to a sudden death, is a sense of shock accompanied by denial and disbelief. It is common to hope that, somehow, this is a terrible mistake and the person is not really dead.
2. Accepting the reality of the loss and experiencing all the pain and other feelings that accompany it is a second task of grief. Rando terms this the "Confrontation" phase. Although you may want to avoid these intense, painful, feelings, you need to experience them to move on with the grief work.
3. A third task involves adjusting to life without the person and investing emotional energy into other relationships. Termed the "Accommodation" phase by Rando, a gradual decline of grief is experienced during this time. You begin to be able to enjoy other relationships again and begin to feel more like your old self. You begin to establish a relationship with the deceased that has a special feeling, but allows you to go forward and form new relationships with others.

Although we generally progress through these tasks, most people tend to move back and forth between them at different times. All of these tasks or phases vary in intensity, length of time, and individual experience. Your experience will not be the same as another's.

Common Reactions to Loss

- Denial, shock, numbness
- Fear and anxiety - "How can I go on?" "Can I survive this terrible pain?"
- Sadness and depression - feelings of loneliness, isolation, hopelessness, self-pity.
- Sorrow, pain and longing.
- Anger - "How could she do this to me?" "How could God let this happen?"

- Guilt - "I should have been more caring." "I should have told her I loved her." "My life is going on and his isn't."
- Confusion and lack of concentration.
- Grief spasms - intense periods of emotional release, usually with a lot of crying.
- Search for meaning.
- Withdrawal from social relationships.
- Physical symptoms - decreased appetite, energy, motivation; difficulty sleeping; weight loss or gain; lethargy; chest pain, pressure, or discomfort; feeling that something is stuck in your throat and many other physical sensations. You also may be more vulnerable to physical illness.

What Can I do to Help the Grief Process?

Specific suggestions for resolving your grief (adapted from Rando):

- Give yourself permission to feel your loss and to grieve over it.
- Accept social support and tell others what you need - find others you can talk to.
- Be realistic in your expectations of yourself as a griever - give yourself some slack. Don't expect yourself to perform at peak capacity while you are grieving.
- Take care of yourself - allow yourself time to do special things for yourself.
- Give some form of expression to all your feelings.
- Participate in social and cultural rituals - funerals, personal rituals, etc.
- Be patient - take whatever time you need. Don't give yourself a deadline to be "over it".
- Allow yourself to have good times and enjoy yourself without guilt.
- Maintain contact with others who have experienced the same loss. If you are a college student away from home and have lost a family member, keep in close contact with those at home experiencing the same loss.
- Talk to a professional or your clergy.

How Can I Help Someone Who is Grieving?

- Be active. Don't wait for the grieving person to contact you. Make a call, send a card, help with practical matters. Don't avoid others who are grieving because it feels uncomfortable - it can mean a lot to show a gesture of caring.
- Listen. Give him or her a chance to talk about whatever thoughts or feelings are on his/her mind. Try to be accepting and non-judgmental.
- Don't minimize the loss. Avoid clichés like "They lived a good life."
- Allow the person to grieve as long as he/she needs to. Don't place your expectations on him/her.
- Take time for yourself.

Need Additional Help?

The University of Idaho Counseling & Testing Center offers free group and individual counseling/psychotherapy for these and related issues for UI students. For more information or to schedule an appointment, call the Counseling & Testing Center (Mary E. Forney Hall, Rm. 306, 1210 Blake Ave.) at 208-885-6716. Website: www.uidaho.edu/ctc
All appointments are strictly confidential.

University employees also have access to free counseling through the Employee Assistance Program, available at 800-999-1077.