

Coping with Grief

Coping with the dying and loss of a loved one can be a very emotionally trying experience. Whether it's a parent, sibling, friend or relative, the reality of losing someone who was close to you can feel overwhelming. While it's true that time heals painful wounds, there are more immediate ways that you can deal with the grief and adjust to your loss. By identifying and accepting your feelings, finding comfort in friends and family, and not being afraid to ask for help, you can ease the grieving process.

The stages of grieving

Each of us copes with grief in a different way. Typically, however, most people go through the following common stages of grieving in the order listed:

1. Shock, denial and isolation. The usual feeling experienced: "This can't be happening to me."
2. Anger, rage, envy and resentment. The usual feeling experienced: "Why me?"
3. Bargaining. The usual feeling experienced: "If you just make it better, God, I promise to..."
4. Depression. The usual feeling experienced: "It's no use."
5. Acceptance. The usual feeling experienced: "I acknowledge what has happened, and I can get through this." If a loved one's death is expected after an illness, family members may have anticipatory grief, which can shorten the process. More severe reactions typically occur after a sudden and unexpected passing.

Common experiences

It's normal for the grief-stricken to experience the following symptoms shortly after learning the bad news:

- Crying
- Inability to sleep
- Lack of interest in eating
- Difficulty in explaining feelings to others
- Exhaustion
- Irritability and uneasiness
- Confusion
- Fear of the future
- Anger (e.g., toward a higher power or toward the deceased for abandoning you)
- Sensitivity (e.g., toward a song or smell that reminds you of the deceased)

Depression and loneliness may set in following the funeral. Relatives and friends have gone back to their lives and may no longer be readily available to offer support. However, these feelings should subside as time passes, as you come to accept the reality of the situation and as you shift from mourning a loved one's death to celebrating his life and wonderful memories.

Grief relief

There are many ways to ease the mourning process. Here are a few suggestions.

- Don't hold back your feelings. The emotions you'll experience upon first learning of the loved one's ill condition or passing will probably come upon you automatically. Experts say the sadness you feel and the tears you shed are absolutely necessary to promote the healing process. Don't deny these feelings - you need to let it out, whether privately or in the comfort of family and friends. Crying is a stress reliever and an endorphin releaser that will make you feel better. Don't be afraid to cry or to confide in loved ones. Talk through your difficult emotions with them.
- There are different ways to vent your emotions. As a cathartic release, some people like to write letters to the deceased expressing exactly how they feel. Others take solace in their faith and the counsel of a religious leader.
- Offer your shoulder to cry on. Be a comforter and a listening ear for friends and family who are also in mourning. It's natural to want to lean on others during this trying time. Be willing to let your grieving relatives and friends lean on you, too. This instinctual urge to be a caregiver can give you the strength and courage to better cope with your grief.
- Honor the deceased's memory. Besides perhaps displaying pictures of the deceased at the wake or giving a moving eulogy at the funeral, consider having a post-funeral get-together with family and friends in which home movies, photographs and keepsakes of the deceased are shown and discussed. Create a family tree scrapbook with your children and write a short biography of the deceased that could be included in it. Some survivors like to express their feelings creatively, by painting a portrait of the deceased, or writing a poem or song about the person. Plan an annual visit to the gravesite, followed by a family dinner. Dedicate part of your work-such as a book, film, or other project- to the memory of the deceased. Or consider launching a special fund or scholarship in the deceased's name.
- Get outside help. You may choose to talk to a therapist or counselor about your feelings, especially if the sadness lingers. Perhaps you have unresolved issues about the deceased or things you wish you would have told that person before he died. Confiding in an expert can help. Also, consider joining a support group for family survivors and mourners.
- Consider taking a hiatus. Aside from taking funeral leave at work, be prepared to give yourself ample time to heal and reflect. After the funeral, you may want to take a leave from your obligations and just get away for a short time-not necessarily to forget, but to recharge your batteries and ponder the impact of the deceased on your life. Take a relaxing vacation in a comfortable setting. Reunite with mourning relatives in another state. Or spend some time alone, perhaps on a mountain-climbing expedition, kayaking trek or excursion to a woodsy cabin.
- Get on with everyday life. Give yourself enough time to properly mourn and reminisce. But don't be afraid to return to normalcy. Just as the deceased would have wanted you to pay your respects and remember him appropriately, so, too, would he have wanted you to enjoy life and make the most of its opportunities. Go back to your family, your job and your everyday routines with the renewed commitment to do the best you can and savor every moment.

While it's important to lament the loss of a loved one and let your feelings flow, don't forget to cherish his life. Death is on the surface a sad occasion. Dig deeper, however, and you'll realize that this occasion is more a celebration of a life, a revisiting of joyful memories shared with a special person that you'll treasure for the rest of your days.

Support resources

There are several groups you can join and organizations to call for resources that can soothe your grief and allow you to network with other mourners. Consider contacting:

- National Hospice Organization 1-703-243-5900
- Compassionate Friends 1-630-990-0010
- National Funeral Director's Association 1-414-789-1880
- National Organization for Victim Assistance (crime victims) 1-202-232-6682
- Institute for Victims of Trauma 1-703-847-8456
- American Trauma Society 1-301-420-4189

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