



HOSPICE MESSAGES OF HOPE

The Journey Called Grief

THE JOURNEY CALLED GRIEF

Grief is an intense and complex journey that cannot be completed overnight, as much as we'd like to. To successfully move through your grief, you need to take an active role in the healing process. It will help to understand how human beings respond to loss, for most have questions about whether their feelings and reactions are normal.

THE EMOTIONAL SIDE OF GRIEF

1. Reacting to loss with shock, numbness and disbelief.

When you experience a trauma, one of the first reactions is to shut down or go numb. This cushions us from overwhelming feelings during early grief. You may feel as if you are on automatic pilot during the first weeks. Even an expected death is a shock.

You can't know how a particular loss is going to feel until the loss actually occurs. You may feel the loss is unreal, a nightmare or a terrible mistake. How long it takes someone to come out of the numbness depends on the individual circumstances surrounding each loss.

One member of the OSF Life After Loss grief support group described it this way:

"When the mortuary people came to take Mary's body to the funeral home, I felt very strange -- like I was in a nightmare that I just hadn't woken up from yet. I was there, but nothing seemed quite real. I remember thinking this is like something you see on TV. This isn't real."

Perhaps you have heard the word "denial" used to describe early reactions to grief. You are encouraged to think in terms of shock, disbelief or numbness. Denial is a negative sounding word that may suggest that you are avoiding something you should be facing. Shock and disbelief are normal and appropriate reactions to a loss. Human beings are not designed to absorb tragic news all at once. Bit by bit you have to allow yourself to understand what the loss means to you. The numbness protects you from being overwhelmed by grief.

2. Begin the difficult journey by understanding your loss is real.

As the numbness wears off, you begin to realize what the loss is going to mean for you. This explains why many grieving individuals actually feel worse after a few months have gone by. The reality of the loss really starts to sink in. Some may still be looking for their deceased loved one to come back into their life again. You will begin some of the hardest grieving at a point when the support you got immediately after the death has tapered off.

A young widow whose husband died suddenly described driving on the interstate three months after his death:

"Up ahead of me was a van just like Ralph's -- same color and model. I drove past my exit trying to catch up with it. I just had to look in and make sure it wasn't Ralph driving. Part of me knew it absolutely couldn't be Ralph but another part of me just had to check it out."

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A middle-aged couple whose son died, dreaded the upcoming holidays because as his father said:

“Robert’s job as a CAT engineer took him all over the United States. Sometimes he’d be gone for months at a time. But, no matter what, he’d always come home for Christmas. I don’t think we’re really going to believe he’s gone until Christmas gets here and he doesn’t show up.”

3. 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 “stuff down” feelings and delay grieving, but the grief will not diminish until you journey through it by experiencing all emotions fully.

On a particularly cold and icy January evening, an older widow arrived late to our grief support group and stated:

“Remember what I said about how I could never be angry with Joe for dying? Well, as I was scraping ice off my car this evening, I found myself calling him names I’d never used in the whole course of our marriage. He always had the car warmed up and cleaned off for me on nights like this.”

A widower shared this:

“I feel guilty for accepting my paychecks some weeks. I’m just not functioning anywhere close to my normal level. I’m an executive, but some days I can’t even remember what button on the phone to push to pick up my incoming calls.”

It’s a challenge to accept that we get better only by feeling very bad for a while.

The following list of emotions associated with loss describes normal and natural responses to the death of a loved one.

COMMON EMOTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH LOSS

Emptiness | Change in appetite | Anger | Disorganization | Extreme loneliness | Guilt Indecisiveness | Feeling abandoned | Depression
Disorientation | Increased irritability | Helplessness | Vulnerability | Inability to concentrate | Panicky thoughts | Anxiety | Loss of
interest in life | Relief | Change in sleep patterns | Questioning of belief system

Avoidance of doing “grief work” does not make grief go away, but only postpones the inevitable encounter with pain. Grief can be delayed for years by individuals who refuse to grieve, who do not allow themselves to grieve, abuse alcohol or medicate themselves past the point of feeling.

4. Identify how your environment has changed and begin to develop new roles, routines and skills in response to the changes.

COMMON CHANGES AFTER A LOSS

Now a single parent | Learn to cook or do housework | No one to share decisions | Responsible for everything | Finances reduced |
Friends have dropped me | Learn to maintain car | Don’t drive and need to learn | Living alone in house | Loss of physical contact |
Retirement plans change | No one to talk to at day’s end | Have to go back to work | Kids trying to run my life | Can’t get back to church |
Can’t get excited by anything

Another widower with a young daughter confessed:

“Of all the things you’d think I’d have trouble with, one of my biggest frustrations is Amy’s hair. What do you do with a 4-year-old’s long, straight hair? My wife always fixed it so nice and now I’m embarrassed by how Amy looks when I take her to day care.”

Losses tear apart the fabric of the routines around which life is structured. They rob us of our comfortable roles. Any changes, especially involuntary ones, disrupt the flow of life. Responsibilities may seem to have doubled overnight. Grieving the loss of routines is an essential part of healing. It is helpful to minimize change elsewhere in life when faced with a loss. It is also important to be gentle and patient with yourself as you establish new roles and routines and take on additional responsibilities.

THE PHYSICAL SIDE OF GRIEF

Grief is not only an emotionally intense journey; it is also a very physical experience. Even when the death is expected, grief may strike with the force of a physical blow, leaving you shaken emotionally and physically. After having pushed yourself physically, you are now feeling the effects of that. As caregivers, even with the best of help, you lost sleep, ate erratically and did more heavy lifting than usual.

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Admit afterwards that you just don't know how you did it - other than running on sheer willpower or adrenaline. You don't realize how deeply fatigued you are until after the end of your loved one's illness. Sleep problems are common during bereavement and may complicate attempts to catch up on rest so don't expect fatigue to disappear overnight.

COMMON PHYSICAL REACTIONS TO GRIEF

Headache | Shortness of breath | Dizziness | Over-sensitive to stimuli | Skin problems | Tightness in the throat | Nausea | Changes in appetite | Dry mouth | Changes in sleep pattern | More accident prone | Hollowness in stomach | Stomachaches | Weakness in muscles | Fatigue | Weakened immune system | Intestinal problems | Heaviness in the chest

Most people have areas of their bodies that "act up" under stress. Some get headaches or stomachaches; others have muscle pain or intestinal problems. While mourning, you need to remind yourself to take time for self-care. If you were a caregiver you may have made your loved one top priority for so long that you put your own needs on the back burner. Now it is time to refocus and ask, "What is my body telling me about its need for food, rest and exercise?"

When a loved one dies, it's common to feel stress and shock. When the body experiences shock, adrenaline increases in the system. When adrenaline goes up, it causes the part of the immune system known as T-cells to be depressed.

When the immune system is depressed, it's easier to catch colds or contract the flu. You may also experience more serious illnesses such as arthritis, heart disease and a variety of other ailments. Research has shown that it can take 1 1/2 to 2 years for the body's immune system to recover from the shock of the death of a loved one. During this time, it is especially important to take care of yourself and use good common sense.

SENSE

S - Share feelings with supportive family members, friends or members of a grief support group

E - Eat nutritiously. If you don't feel like eating, at least snack on healthy foods like fruit and vegetables

N - Need fluids; drink lots of water - minimize caffeinated beverages

S - Sleep at night; if needed, nap for short periods during the day

E - Exercise, especially stretching; aerobics, like walking, are good too

Of course, these are good things to do all the time, but when grieving, they are absolutely necessary. "Grief work," or mourning, takes lots of energy. And it is normal to feel more tired than usual. Keeping your body healthy will help you think and feel better.

Increased concern about individual health and the health of other family members is also normal. Losing someone close brings up feelings of physical vulnerability. There may be a period when you may worry excessively about every little bump or cough. A physical exam to assess the physical impact of stress and to relieve fears is a sound idea.

Lastly, because most are fatigued and distracted during bereavement, you need to be careful to pay attention when driving or performing other tasks that require concentration.

HELPFUL TASKS WHEN GRIEVING

Thinking About Your Loss

Relive experiences in your thoughts. Allow the details and the emotions that come with them to be fully expressed. Explore memories as they come up. Your body is bringing these thoughts up as part of the healing process. The repetition of painful memories helps flush out the strong emotions attached to them.

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Talking About Your Loss

There is much release in talking about your loss. You may need to tell the same story over and over as a way to heal. You may need to talk about your loss for a long time but wonder if anyone wants to hear about it anymore. Support groups are a place where you can always have the opportunity to be heard.

Writing About Your Loss

Keeping a journal isn't for everyone, but it can be a powerful tool for healing. Writing about feelings and events can help your focus and identify emotions. Words can constructively channel fear and pain and can create a record of your progress. There are some good books available on keeping a journal if you need help getting started.

Crying About Your Loss

Tears can relieve a lot of pressure. You need to trust your body's need to cry or not to cry. There will be both wet spells and dry spells while grieving. Remember, crying does not mean you are weak or out of control.

Making Space for Your Loss

When a loved one dies, the loss of routines may leave you feeling you have too much unstructured time to grieve. Other times, you may be so busy you need to create quiet moments to work with your feelings. Sometimes you need a down day just to sit with your loss. Respect your needs for healing time and create opportunities to grieve.

Timetables for Grief

One of the most frequently asked questions is: "How long will these feelings last?" The following guidelines are general descriptions and may vary widely from one individual to another.

Month One:

In the first month, you may be so busy with funeral arrangements, visitors, paperwork and other immediate tasks that you have little time to begin the grieving process. You may also be numb and feel the loss is unreal. This shock can last beyond the first month if the death was sudden, violent or particularly untimely.

Month Three:

The three-month point is a particularly challenging time. Visitors have gone home, cards and calls have pretty much stopped coming in and most of the numbness has worn off. Well-meaning family and friends who do not understand the grief process, may pressure you to get back to normal. You are just beginning the very painful task of understanding what this loss really means.

Months Four through 13:

During this time, you continue to work through the many tasks of learning to live with the loss. You begin to have more good days than bad days. Difficult periods will crop up sometimes with no obvious trigger, even late into the last half of the first year. It is important you understand these difficult periods are normal, rather than a set back, lack of progress or a sign of weakness.

Significant Anniversaries:

During the first year, personal and public holidays present additional challenges. Birthdays (of the deceased and other family members), wedding anniversaries and family and school reunions can be difficult periods. Medical anniversaries, such as the day of the diagnosis, the day your loved one was hospitalized or came home from the hospital can also bring up memories. You may not be consciously keeping track of these dates but they will still affect you.

The One-Year Anniversary of the Death:

Reactions to the anniversary of the death may begin days or weeks before the actual date. Many people describe reliving those last difficult days. Even when you have been doing well toward the end of the first year, you may be surprised at how intensely the one-year anniversary affects you. Additional acknowledgment or support may be needed during this time.

The Second Year:

It can take as long as two years to start feeling like you have established workable new routines and a new identity without your loved one. Many of the tasks of the second year have to do with re-assessing your goals, discovering who you are and creating a "new normal."

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BEREAVEMENT RESOURCES

PERIODICAL:

“Bereavement: A Magazine of Hope and Healing”

Bereavement Publishing Inc., 8133 Telegraph Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80920

ONLINE:

GriefNet. This webpage at www.griefnet.org offers support groups for many kinds of loss, as well as a library and list of resources.

SELECTED BOOKS:

“*Being a Widow*” by Lynn Caine

“*Widower: When Men are Left Alone*” by S. Campbell & P. Silverman

“*Grieving: How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies*” by Therese A. Rando

“*I’m Grieving As Fast As I Can*” by Linda Feinberg

“*The Grief Recovery Handbook*” by J.W. James & F. Cherry

“*Men and Grief*” by Carol Staudacher

“*The Courage to Grieve*” by Judy Tatelbaum

“*The Worst Loss: How Families Heal from the Death of a Child*” by Barbara D. Rosof

“*How to Survive the Loss of a Child*” by Catherine Sanders

“*Silent Grief: Living in the Wake of Suicide*” by Christopher Lukas & Henry Seiden

OSF Home Care Services is here to support you and wants to meet you wherever you are in your grief journey.

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