

## **Grief - Dealing with the Loss of a Loved One**

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One of the most difficult experiences you can have in your entire life, is the loss of a loved one. It is one of the most stress life events there is. No one is ever fully prepared for the death of a loved one--even when they have been sick for some time. You may think that you know how you will feel, but chances are good, that what you expected to experience is not what happens.

Grief is such a solitary experience that it often feels as if we are going through it all alone. This is despite the probability that we have others in our families or in our lives who are also grieving the person we have lost. The experience of grief is one that most people past a certain age have had. It is a universal life event. Yet, we feel so all alone in our experience of it.

We each experience and deal with grief in our own unique, individual way. There are no "rights" or "wrongs" in how we grieve. There is no published time table or established norm for the length of time appropriate for mourning the loss of a parent, a spouse, a child, or a friend.

Many people expect others to be devastated by the loss of someone that they love, yet do not believe that they should experience the pain that they have. We know that others will be having emotional and psychological symptoms, even physical symptoms. Yet when we experience some of those, we may shame ourselves or put ourselves down for being "weak". We may believe that we should recover quickly from the loss and get on with our lives. We may not expect to feel angry.

Many people go through a brief shock or emotional numbness. It may even surprise you when you begin to feel the overwhelming loss and sense of separation/absence. You miss, or even long for the person, their presence, their contributions, their help, even their annoying habits. There is often a period of disorganization where you have trouble concentrating, or following through with anything. You may feel generally incompetent and incapable of accomplishing anything. It is as if you need to relearn to do the normal things in your life without that person.

Eventually, you seem to regain a kind of personal balance and are able to reorganize your life and regain your ability to focus. Sooner or later you will be able to see a project from beginning to end and will be able to envision a life without them. Eventually we adjust to their being gone. There is no disloyalty in adjusting to reality.

Anger is also a normal part of the grieving process. This anger usually needs a focus, so it often comes out sideways. Sometimes the focus gets projected onto the funeral home, the hospital, the nursing staff, or cousin Bob that was never there before the end, God, or yourself for not saving him/her. Often the person you are angry with is the one who died. You feel angry with them for abandoning you. The whole idea of being angry with someone that didn't want to die, seems absurd or somehow "wrong", yet, that is often the case.

People often feel angry with God over their loss and this may sit just as uncomfortably with folks who believe it is just plain "wrong" to be mad at God, yet that is exactly what is going on.

Anger is just a feeling. It is not wrong to feel anger. It is not wrong for it to have a focus that doesn't make any sense to you. The thing to do about the anger you experience with grief is to keep talking about it. Write about it; feel it. Ask yourself about the meanings that you give to the things that you are angry about. Don't act out your anger. Remember that anger can come out sideways toward other family members. They may actually have very little to do with it.

Many family members come apart when significant people die and the cohesion and unity of that family is lost. Acting out of anger can increase the probability of that happening. One of the ways that anger is acted out, is in blame. Many times, we don't know why someone dies and we will never know why they died. We have a "should" in our minds that the people we love should live for a long, long time, and if they don't, someone must be at fault.

Guilt is similarly a normal part of the grieving process. Many people who experience the loss of a loved one will find something to feel guilty about. It just seems to go with the territory. We may feel guilty about not spending enough time with them, about being cranky when they were demanding, or for "not knowing or understanding" some information that might have changed the outcome. Children feel guilty as well, so it is important to check with the kids to see what they are thinking and to re-assure them that it is not their fault.

The best things to do to deal with your grief is to give yourself permission to grieve and the time that you need to do it. Feel what you feel. Talk about it. Let other people be there for you. If they try to tell you how to grieve or how long to cry, tell them that their suggestions are not helping. You can be assertive with others who don't know what to say or do to help you, by giving them the feedback of what is helping and what is not.

Family culture has a big impact on how you deal with grief. If your family members just shut down and believe that if you don't think about it, it will go away, you may think that this is the best way to handle it. This is usually not the case, however. Similarly, some families routinely visit the grave site of family members who have died, while other families never return, except to bury another member. You have to decide what is right for you in how to grieve and how to celebrate the lives of your loved ones.

Sometimes people in your life will get frustrated with your ongoing grief because they can't fix it. For many people the experience of helplessness moves right into anger. If you need a willing ear, join a grief group or go to counseling. Get whatever help that you need to accomplish the process. Don't shame yourself for grieving. When someone that you love dies, you are supposed to grieve.

Below are suggestions to assist you in getting through the grieving process:

1. Write about your favorite memory of the person you lost.
2. Pull out some pictures that are not too painful and talk about the event or the time that the picture was taken.
3. Seek out people who have experienced a similar loss and who understand what you are going through.
4. Keep a journal.
5. Read about grieve and loss- to tolerance.
6. Talk about the person.
7. Identify, own, and express your feelings. Keep in mind that fear, anger, guilt, hurt, sadness, and abandoned are common.
8. Talk about any anger that you might have toward God or the person who died.
9. Do things to get out of self. Volunteer, garden, or do something for your neighbor.
10. If you are in charge of their stuff, get help to sort through it all. Have someone else present. Take lots of breaks. Cry. Talk about your feelings. Do it to tolerance.
11. Maintain your social life. Get out and about -- to tolerance again.
12. Go to a grief support group.
13. Don't pretend to feel what you don't feel. Be real.
14. When you are hit with another wave of grief when you least expect it, just acknowledge it and feel it. Don't beat yourself up about not being finished with grieving yet. Give your self credit for making it through each wave.
15. Use this time to nurture yourself.
16. Try to be tolerant of others when they say dumb stuff that is not helpful. They probably mean well and are using their own family culture norms to try to help you through the process.