

Dealing With Grief: A Guide to Understanding Your Reactions

Material Courtesy of Victoria Hospice Bereavement Program

When someone important to you dies, you grieve. This means that you may experience a wide range of responses, often over an extended period of time. The following three sections generally coincide with early, middle and later grief, though variation and overlap of these phases is common.

When a death occurs

As you accept the fact of the death of someone important, you will feel shock, numbness and disbelief that this has happened. Panic and strong physical and emotional reactions are common.

Adjusting to loss

Later, as the numbness subsides, you will deal with what this loss means to you and the emotional pain of grieving. The intensity of feeling may surprise or frighten you, but it is natural and can be resolved as you move through it.

As life goes on

As you adjust to life without the person who died, you will begin to re-establish connections with the world around you. You have more energy for family and friends, work and other interests.

Grief may be somewhat familiar, or it may be a new, uncertain endeavour. It is not an easy journey and there may be times when you want more support than is available through your social network.

The Grief Journey

When a death occurs

Walking the Edges

SOCIAL

Withdrawal from others
Unrealistic expectations of self and others
Poor judgement about relationships

PHYSICAL

Shortness of breath and palpitations
Digestive upsets
Low energy, weakness and restlessness

EMOTIONAL

Crying, sobbing and wailing
Indifference and emptiness
Outrage and helplessness

MENTAL

Confusion, forgetfulness and poor concentration
Denial and daydreaming
Constant thoughts about the person who died and/or the death

SPIRITUAL

Blaming God or life
Lack of meaning, direction or hope
Wanting to die or join the person who died

What helps

- To pace yourself moment to moment
- To make no unnecessary changes
- To talk about the person and the death

- To use practical and emotional supports

Adjusting to loss

Entering the Depths

SOCIAL

Rushing into new relationships
Wanting company but unable to ask
Continued withdrawal and isolation
Self-consciousness

PHYSICAL

Changes in appetite and sleep patterns
Shortness of breath and palpitations
Digestive upsets

EMOTIONAL

Intense and conflicting emotions
Magnified fear for self or others
Anger, sadness, guilt, depression

MENTAL

Sense of going crazy
Memory problems
Difficult to concentrate/understand
Vivid dreams or nightmares

SPIRITUAL

Trying to contact the person who died
Sensing the presence of the person who died; visitations
Continued lack of meaning

What helps

- To recognize and express emotions
- To acknowledge changes
- To understand grief and know others experience similar responses

As life goes on
Mending the Heart

SOCIAL

More interest in daily affairs of self/others
Ability to reach out and meet others
Energy for social visits and events

PHYSICAL

Physical symptoms subside
Sleep pattern and appetites are more settled
Gut-wrenching emptiness lightens

EMOTIONAL

Emotions are less intense
Feeling of coming out of the fog
More peace; less guilt

MENTAL

Increased perspective about the death
Ability to remember with less pain
Improved concentration and memory
Dreams and nightmares decrease

SPIRITUAL

Reconnection with religious/spiritual beliefs
Life has new meaning and purpose
Acceptance of death as part of life cycle

What helps

- To reflect on progress since the death
- To begin envisioning a future
- To engage in new activities
- To establish new roles and relationships

We have chosen the image of the labyrinth as a metaphor for the journey through grief. A labyrinth is not a maze as there are no dead ends and no wrong turnings. There is only one way - forward. So it is with grief. The only way through is forward,

with many turns and going back and forth over what seems like the same territory. We journey to the centre of our grief, to the centre of ourselves, and then slowly return to re-enter the world.

Each person's experience on the journey of grief will be different. This is a reflection of our personal style, our relationship with the person who died, our internal and social resources, and our past history of coping. As you journey through your own grief process, there will likely be unexpected turns and insights.

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HEP - Hospice Enhancement Program

Partners

BC Bereavement Helpline
BC Hospice Palliative Care Association
Living Through Loss Counseling Society
White Rock Hospice Society

A program supported by United Way of the Lower Mainland

*For bereavement support in your area,
Call the BC Bereavement Helpline at
1-877-779-2223 or contact your
local Hospice Society*

