

What Helps You Cope With Grief?

Grief is a normal response to any loss. Each person's grief journey is unique, yet the process of grief is similar regardless of what was lost: a loved one, a relationship, your health or your loved one's health, your home, your identity/role related to family or job, your income and/or your hopes and dreams. The intensity of your grief is directly related to the strength of your attachment to what was lost.

SUPPORT

Sharing and talking about your loss is an important part of healing. *Talk with someone who listens without giving advice, lets you talk about whatever you need to discuss, accepts you where you are, and doesn't try and make you feel differently.* Talking with someone helps you begin to acknowledge the reality of your loss.

EXPRESS YOUR FEELINGS

Accept that all feelings are okay and all are both a normal and necessary part of healing. Identify your feelings, name them, talk about them, and write about them. The intensity of your feelings can make you feel out of control and overwhelm your normal coping strategies. The feelings of grief are like the waves of the ocean. Sometimes the feelings are big and it's high tide, and sometimes they are small and it's low tide. Sometimes the feelings are stormy, and sometimes they're calm.

EMBRACE GRIEF

There is **no right way to** deal with grief and people deal with grief differently. *What is most important is NOT to bury your grief or avoid it.* The key to dealing with grief is to embrace it and to allow all the varying feelings of grief to flow. The specific feelings of grief vary with each phase of the grief process. In the beginning, you **avoid** accepting your loss with feelings of shock, denial, and anger. Towards the 9 month mark, you start to **confront** the reality of your loss and your more intense feelings of sadness, anger, heartbreak, fear, guilt and depression. Somewhere in the second year you start to accept your loss and start to make **accommodations** in your life for your loss. Your feelings begin to feel less intense and you experience more moments of peace and happiness.

As you feel and express your feelings during the different phases of your grief, remember: **it is not that you are having a bad day, but a grieving day. Just as you cannot stop the waves in the ocean, you cannot stop the feelings of grief. You can only ride the wave of your grief and find a comfortable place to express it.** *Find time to be with your pain now; postponed grief returns later. Connect yourself with what you have lost, your old sense of self or the person you lost. When you are ready, use memory triggers, such as, photos, clothing, or a special place in your home to be at peace and feel nurtured.*

Wendy Feiereisen describes how grief changes as we embrace it in her poem, "Grief"

You don't get over it/ you just get through it
you don't get by it/ because you can't get around it
it doesn't "get better"/ it just gets different
every day.../grief puts on a new face.

Understanding the Phases of Grief

Remember, everyone experiences the phases of grief differently and there is no timetable. As people experience the process of grief, they will move in and out of each phase more than once.

Avoidance Phase

Shock, numbness, denial, and disbelief are the initial reactions to grief. We are overwhelmed with feelings of unreality, and the life we are living in now feels surreal. This is particularly true with an unexpected loss. It takes time for the shock to wear off and denial allows individuals to accept parts of their new reality a little at a time.

Protesting the loss and feeling angry happen when you step out of your shock and denial and start to accept your new reality. The typical response is “*Why me?*” “*It’s not fair.*” Our need to have control prompts us to search out answers, such as, *why it happened, how we could have stopped it or prevented it.* Unfortunately, there are often no answers, and of course it is not fair. After asking the same questions over and over and after expressing anger and frustration, many people begin to move into the next phase of intense sadness.

Yearning and searching for what you lost is another way of protesting the loss. It is typical during this time to review many of the “*If only...*” thoughts. Again there are no answers to these thoughts. “*If only...I should have...I could have...*” are phrases that reflect our intense desire to have control over what happened. When you hear yourself using these phrases, picture a barrier at the top of a slope and stop yourself from finishing the thought. Remember, at the bottom of this slippery slope is a dead end and if you continue your “*if only*” and “*should have*” thoughts, you will slide down the slope and then need to climb back up.

During this phase there is *the sensation that it was a mistake; everything will go back to the way it was, my loved one is going to walk through the door any minute or my health will return.* This sensation is usually gone by the 9th month and many people experience this as a particularly intense period of grieving. Somewhere around this time, you begin to move in and out of the **avoidance phase** and into the **confrontation phase** as you confront the reality that you will not find what you lost.

Confrontation Phase

This phase starts with the recognition that your life will not return to the way it was. *You have moved beyond feeling that your life is surreal and into recognizing that the way your life is now is your new normal.* Your grief during this time is very intense with your feelings being very acute and at times overwhelming, resulting in a state of disorganization.

Angry-sadness, depression-sadness, despair, heartbreak, fear, guilt, and disorganization are characteristic reactions once the grieving person has expressed their initial anger and frustration at the loss. This is when mourning starts and embracing the pain is very important. At this time people feel very tired and very sad. The extreme tiredness, difficulty concentrating, difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much, and the feelings of helplessness are all characteristics of both grief and depression. It is easy to begin to describe yourself as depressed when you are feeling the intense feelings of sadness and grief. It is more helpful to describe this non-productive, reflective time as sadness and grief. Let a professional decide if your grief and sadness have turned into depression.

As individuals embrace their loss and intense sadness, Robert L. Veninga (1985) in *A Gift of Hope*, identifies four themes that emerge:

“My life will never be the same.”

“I have let everybody down.”

“I will never be happy again.”

“My spouse [loved one] does not understand me.”

An aspect of each of these themes is a sense of hopelessness and the awareness that old beliefs have been shaken. There is hurt, despair, and an absolute quality to each theme. The grieving person’s sense of order and belief in how the world is, has been shaken, and in this sense, their “life will never be the same.” You may become angry that your loved one or health has abandoned you and that your dreams for the future are gone. You may even feel that “part of you has died” as you have also lost a significant person or aspect of your life. With this loss, you may feel that “nothing means anything to you any more. Not life, not work, not God--nothing.” This is a time of being confused about your identity, role, and what is meaningful to you.

We all want to believe that we can control our lives, and if we do not, then we have the irrational belief that we betrayed the standards that we set for ourselves and “let everybody down.” The sadness (depression) in this phase many times leaves the grieving person with the absolute thought that they “will never be happy again.” This is part of the intense feeling of being heartbroken.

Fear, anger, guilt, and sadness (depression) are the key emotions of grief. Experiencing each emotion is normal and a necessary, natural process. *Sadness* (depression) is a time of slowing down and looking inward. It is through the experience of looking inward and re-evaluating one's life that the growth and learning occur. As you deal with each emotion, a valuable learning comes from each emotional struggle:

Through fear one learns: *"I can't stay afraid, I must live life and continue to love even though people die or leave."*

Through expressing anger one learns: *to forgive God, the universe, etc. for not being perfect or fair.*

Through dealing with guilt one learns *to forgive one's self: "I guess I'm just human and I did the best I could."*

Because of the intense pain and feelings of despair, we expect that others who are close to us can fix it, comfort us, and make it go away. *Grief is an individual process* and it is very difficult for your loved ones who are also grieving and in pain to reach out and comfort you. It is important to remember that you cannot take any shortcuts as you deal with your grief and each person's timetable is different.

Accommodation Phase

Entry in this phase occurs gradually as there is a decline in the acute feelings of grief and the slow beginning of an emotional and social re-entry or slow re-connection to every day life. You begin to live your life with your loss. This does not mean that you have forgotten or ignore your loss; it means that you have accepted your loss and can accept your life with the changes that the loss has brought. If someone has died, it means that can now connect with them in a different way. If you (or loved one) have lost your health, you connect with the new you and accept what you can do.

Awakening and the seeds of reorganization occur only after the anger, depression, and sadness have been expressed and you have let go of the anger and sadness (depression). Letting go of the anger, sadness (depression) does not mean that you let go of your relationship with this special person. You will always have a relationship with what you have lost; you may feel sad but not the intense pain. This phase does not happen suddenly, but gradually. One day you realize that you did not think about your loss for 15 minutes, and these moments without sadness and despair begin to increase. A search for meaning in one's life begins, and this is a strong signal that healing is beginning.

Acknowledgement, acceptance and reorganization mean that you recognize that there is no other option and you are ready to build a different kind of relationship with what you lost. Your search for meaning and the restructuring of your life becomes very significant in this stage.

SEARCHING FOR MEANING

It is through the struggle of dealing with the pain that learning and growth occurs. An aspect of dealing with the pain is dealing with the many "if only" thoughts. It is in dealing with these thoughts that you find a way of forgiving yourself and find what is meaningful to you. As the meaning in your life changes, you question all of your previous beliefs including spiritual ones and begin to make major life changes such as how you spend your time, and what you do. What was once important may no longer be important and this can confuse people close to you. As you experience these changes, it is important to talk about how these changes are affecting you.

Create ceremonies and new traditions or rituals. A symbolic activity can be very helpful and speak to you in a place where words cannot. Many people light a candle, release balloons, make a scrapbook, journal, write a letter and mail it or burn it, and/or make a place in their home to honor or let go of what you lost. A woman, who lost her son cut up his jeans and shirts and made them into a patchwork quilted jacket. Another woman sewed her mother's jewelry on a pretty tapestry vest. Find what works for you.

TO TALK WITH SOMEONE...Contact the **Employee Assistance Program at 815-753-9191**. We will talk with you, your group, or department about coping with grief. You may also call DeKalb County Hospice at 815-756-3000 for further assistance in dealing with grief.

READINGS

Many people find it affirming to read what others say about what they are experiencing. Below is a very short list of books related to different types of grief and loss. For a more extensive listing and description of books on grief, go to www.compassionbooks.com.

Grieving a Loss

- *A Time To Grieve: Meditations for Healing After the Death of a Loved One* by Carol Staudacher, printed by Harper Collins Publisher, NY, 1994. ISBN: 0-06-250845-8
- *Grieving Forward: Embracing Life Beyond Loss* by Susan Duke, printed by Warner Faith, New York.
- *How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies* by Terese A. Rando, Ph.D, printed by Bantam Books, NY, 1988. ISBN 0-553-35269-5
- *Healing Grief At Work: 100 Practical ideas After Your Workplace Is Touched by Loss* by Alan d. Wolfelt, Ph.D, printed by Companion, Fort Collins, Colorado. ISBN 1879-651-45-9
- *I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye: Surviving, Coping and Healing after the Sudden Death of a Loved One* by Brook Noel and Pamela Blair, printed by SourceBook, Inc. in Naperville, IL (www.sourcebooks.com) 2007. BG 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
- *Life After Loss: Conquering Grief and Finding Hope* by Raymond A Moody, Jr., M.D., Ph.D. and Dianne Arcagel, M.S. printed by HarperSanFrancisco, 2001. ISBN:0-06-251730-9 (also author of *Life after Life*).
- *Life Lessons* by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler, printed by Scriber, NY, 2000. ISBN -13: 978-0-684-87075-5
- *The Grief Recovery Handbook: The Action Program for Moving Beyond Death, Divorce, and other Losses* by John W. James and Russell Friedman printed by HarperPerennial, NY, 1998. ISBN: 0-06-095273 (also wrote *When Children Grieve*)
- *The Courage to Grieve: Creative Living, Recovery & Growth through Grief* by Judy Tatelbaum, printed by Harper & Row Publishers, NY, 1980. ISBN 0-06-091185-9
- *The Journey Through Grief – Reflections on Healing* by Alan Wolfelt, printed by Companion Press in Fort Collins, Colorado, 1997. (a journal) ISBN: 1-879651-34-3

Dealing with the Loss of a Spouse

- *Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas* by Allan Wolfelt, printed by Companion Press in Fort Collins Colorado, 1988.

Coping with the Loss of a Child

- *When the Bough Breaks* by Judith Bernstein, printed by Andrews Mc Meel Publishing in Kansas City, 1998.

Coping with the Loss of Your Parent

- *The Orphaned Adult: Understanding and Coping with Grief and Change after Death of our Parents* by Alexander Levy printed by Perseus Publishing. ISBN 0-7362-0361-0

Children's Books

- *When Dinosaurs Die* by Laurie & Mark Brown printed by Little Brown & Co. in Boston, 1996.
- *Why Do People Die* by Cynthia McGregor, printed by Carol Publishing in Secaucus, N.J., 1999.

Helping Others

- *I Don't Know How To Help Them* by Linda Maurer, printed by L. Maurer in Boulder, Colorado, 1996.
- *What Can I Say? How to Help Someone Who Is Grieving: A Guide* by Kelly Osmont, printed by Nobility Press in Portland, Oregon, 1988.

Trauma

- *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* by Judith Herman, M.D., printed by Basic Books, NY, 1997. ISBN 04-465-08730-2