

Understanding Grief and Loss

Grief is the intense sorrow people experience following a loss. It is a normal and necessary process that requires time to work through. Loss is a normal, and inevitable, part of human life. The process of mourning, or grieving, is a necessary one that helps to bring us back to a state of “equilibrium”, which was disrupted by the loss.

Grief brings with it intense feelings and emotions. Many people feel deep pain when they experience a loss. In our culture, grief is not always well understood, and ongoing responses to loss are not always readily accepted. The better we can understand the process of grief, the more likely we will be able to cope with the loss and heal the associated pain.

Although grief is often closely associated with the loss of someone through death, people also experience grief through the following losses:

- ▶ Loss of property following natural disasters
- ▶ Loss of income or business
- ▶ Death of a pet
- ▶ Loss of health through disease, illness, accident and ageing
- ▶ Work changes such as unemployment, change in job, retirement
- ▶ Changes in, or ending of, relationships – separation, divorce, friends moving away
- ▶ Loss of “place” through moving house, geographic re-location
- ▶ Moving through life stages – children becoming teenagers, children moving out of home, changes due to the ageing process
- ▶ Miscarriage or abortion
- ▶ Hopes, goals, or dreams that are not realised

It isn't possible to apply any specific time span to the grieving process. Some people return to a state of stability or equilibrium in a short space of time, others may take longer. Every person who grieves is unique. Their capacities to grieve and heal themselves from loss may depend on a number of factors such as personality, coping behaviours, previous experiences of loss and grief, their relationship to the person who died, their support networks.

There is no prescribed way to grieve. Many people cry, some do not. Some people want to talk about their loss, others don't. People report that their grief experience comes and goes, some describe it as an unpredictable “roller coaster” ride. Some people feel worse early in the grieving process, others report feeling worse weeks and months after the event. People may struggle with a number of different feelings at any one time. This can feel confusing and frightening, but it is important to remember that intense feelings of sorrow, pain, confusion and anger are all normal experiences of grief.

Many people will experience intense grief and sorrow on the anniversary of the loss, or at significant times of the year such as birthdays and holidays, and family events such as weddings and graduations. At these times they may be reminded that their loved ones are not there to share in events that they would have before, or that life will never be the same again.



While there are no set “stages” of grief, the following are all common responses:

- ▶ Numbness and shock
- ▶ Sobbing, crying
- ▶ Longing to bring the person (or situation) back
- ▶ Overwhelming feelings of loss, anguish, pain
- ▶ Intense emotions
- ▶ Denial that the event occurred
- ▶ Questioning (why did this happen? Why did he/she die?)
- ▶ Repetitious thinking and statements
- ▶ Loss of appetite
- ▶ Difficulty sleeping
- ▶ Bodily distress such as headache, stomach upset, chest pains
- ▶ Preoccupation with the event
- ▶ Confusion, difficulty making decisions
- ▶ Idealisation of the person/situation that has been lost
- ▶ Reality of the loss sets in
- ▶ Anxiety and panic, feeling “crazy”
- ▶ Depression and sadness
- ▶ Helplessness, being in “limbo”
- ▶ Guilt, resentment, despair, bitterness
- ▶ Anger – at self, at others, at the person who died
- ▶ Loneliness
- ▶ Hope
- ▶ Renewal

All of these feelings, behaviours and emotions help people to make sense of the loss, and to integrate the loss into their lives. Not all people will experience all of these, but all are normal responses to loss. Ways to assist a grieving person can include:

- ▶ “Being there” while a person is grieving
- ▶ Listening to the grieving person
- ▶ Acknowledge their loss
- ▶ Assure them that their grief reactions are normal and understandable
- ▶ Do not compare a grieving person with others. Accept that each person may grieve differently
- ▶ Allow the person to grieve at their own pace
- ▶ Recognise that normal routines can be useful
- ▶ Assist the person to make decisions, but avoid deciding for them
- ▶ Encourage them not to make big life-changing decisions, but assist them to make smaller decisions that can help them feel in control of their lives
- ▶ Talk about the loss, talk about the person who died
- ▶ Encourage them to eat well-balanced meals, but avoid “making” them eat
- ▶ Avoid numbing the pain with alcohol or other drugs
- ▶ Assist with practical matters like childcare, housework, etc – but do consult the bereaved person about this

People who are grieving need to give themselves “permission” to grieve – to express and experience the intense emotions that grieving can bring. They need to have their grief validated by people around them.

People who are grieving need to be able to grieve in their own way, and for as long as it naturally takes. Many people find that they experience intense grief on the anniversary of the loss, or at significant times of the year such as birthdays and holidays, and family events such as weddings and graduations. At these times they may be reminded that their loved ones are not there to share in events that they would have before. Friends, family, colleagues and peers can offer assurance and support at these times too.



📞 Your EAP is there to help

Remember the EAP offers support through confidential face-to-face, telephone and online counselling for individuals and coaching and advice for managers. Appointments can be made by telephoning your EAP provider, Davidson Trahaire Corpsych (DTC), on [1300 360 364](tel:1300360364).