

Notice:

This information is given for informational and educational purposes only and is not intended to be treatment or counseling advice.

Understanding and coping with Bereavement and Loss

Introduction

We are all survivors of loss. Every day that we live is a day which won't come back, and in any one lifetime loved people and detested people, happy situations and horrible ones, precious possessions and unwanted ones depart, never to return.

Much of this daily loss will go unheeded. The focus will be on the new situations, acquisitions, opportunities and people which replace and sometimes displace what went before. We will not perceive ourselves as 'bereaved'.

That comes when we knowingly lose something or someone which or who was precious to us, on which or whom depended our personal well-being and happiness. This can include, besides the death of a person, the loss of a pet, the ending of an important relationship, damage to our health, the loss of a job or a home, the crashing of a daydream or aspiration. It can include the loss of a positive view of ourselves or the world we inhabit, or the loss of security and safety.

Any of these losses, if severe enough, (and only the bereaved individual can estimate the severity of the loss for him or herself) can bring about a response of grief and mourning. This is a painful process, but need not be a fearful one. Grief and mourning are the natural and healthy processes which will carry the bereaved person from the initial shock of loss through to full adjustment and recovery.

They are processes which will not be hurried. Often there is an anxiety in the bereaved person to 'get over it' or 'deal with it' within a certain time span. Others, wanting to see the bereaved person happy again, may apply subtle pressures towards rapid recovery. Just as a physical wound will repair itself in it's own good time, so an aching heart and sad mind will take their own time to ease and mend. And they will ease and mend in time if you trust the process of grief and allow it to do it's work.

Bereavement through death

Losing someone with whom we were closely involved is perhaps the thing we most fear in life and will be among the most challenging events that we will ever have to cope with.

Reactions and Feelings

There are no rules about what to feel, and the loss of a significant person in your life might have complicated meanings for you. You may have had a bad relationship with the person. You may have watched them suffer or had your life disrupted by the need to care for them. There may be relief or guilt or resentment amongst other feelings. There aren't 'right' or 'wrong' feelings. Your feelings are your instinctive responses and will reflect the full meaning of this loss to you. Even where the loss is of someone much loved and missed, the feelings will be complex and perhaps surprising.

Numbness

This is often the first feeling, especially when there has been no advance warning of the loss. The brain is in such a state of shock that it refuses to recognise the full implications of what has changed. You know the facts, but the feelings seem to be somewhere else. There is a sense of unreality and you may find yourself saying something along the lines of 'I can't take it in'. That is exactly the case - your numbed brain can't respond to all the aspects of this enormous, unwanted change.

Sometimes there is even a positive charge. You are aware that something momentous is happening to you and you gather yourself up to deal with it. This seems to be nature's way of giving you some space before the full realisation of the bereavement sinks fully into your consciousness.

Sadness

The sadness of loss is sometimes described as 'searching and yearning'. There is a deep longing for reunion with the person who has gone. Life without the lost person may seem empty, meaningless and desolate, and the bereaved are restless, struggling both consciously and unconsciously to retrieve their lost one. This can manifest itself in intense preoccupation. There can be a dwelling on memories, which, whether happy or sad, can cause intense pain. There can be momentary forgetfulness; familiar sights and sounds - a car in the street, the ring of the 'phone - may suggest the presence of the lost one, only to be overtaken by rapid and agonising realisation of the permanence of loss. There are often dreams, which inevitably give way to a cold and sinking realisation of loss on waking.

Anger

When you are hurt physically, in amongst the shock, fear and pain, isn't there also a little spark of outrage? 'What did I do to deserve that?' And so it is when you are hurt emotionally. In the pain of loss, we may be angry with someone we hold to blame, we may be angry with the lost one for abandoning us, we may be angry with ourselves, or with God or Fate or the 'System'. We may be angry with those who are trying to care for us, or those whom we perceive as not caring.

Envy

Closely linked with anger, may come envy - envy of those whose lives have not been turned upside down like yours, envy of those whose pain is physical and can be treated, envy even of the deceased who is out of pain, while you flounder in it.

Guilt

You may feel guilty about being angry and envious or about 'unfinished business with the deceased. Did you do enough for them? love them enough? show that you loved them? Most of our interactions with others are based on the belief that there will be other times to put things right or express our feelings. It's not unreasonable to expect that, and a big shock when time runs out.

Loss of Confidence

The loss of someone important to you will affect the way you feel about yourself. Along with the deceased has gone that part of you which related to them. Just as, if you had a limb amputated, you would need to negotiate a new body shape and centre of gravity, so, in emotional terms, you have to explore yourself-without-the-lost-one. At first you may feel reduced, incomplete, full of doubt as to your ability to cope without the deceased.

Anxiety and Panic

Losing someone through death is a traumatic event. A typical and understandable response to traumatic happenings is to feel exposed and out of control. This gives rise to feelings of anxiety and panic. We feel ill-prepared and under-equipped. We may have a strong sense that the death was not meant to happen and even though, in our right minds, we know it can't be reversed, we may still feel obscurely prompted to try.

Depression

This state probably includes all of the foregoing. The mixed and fluctuating moods following bereavement may combine together to cause the bereaved person to lose a sense of meaning, purpose and hope in life.

Loss of Faith or Increase in Spirituality

Those with a religious faith may find themselves questioning their previous beliefs, while those without belief find themselves in a state of heightened spirituality. These changes can be temporary or permanent. The loss of a life can put the survivors in touch with a sense of the fragility of life and their own mortality, causing them to think about dimensions beyond.

Fear of Death

The death of a person who has had a significant role in your life brings home the reality of death, including your own. This may be even more marked where the death is of a sibling or peer. There can be anxiety about one's own health and safety.

Respite and Relief

So far, the package may sound dreadful, but there will be moments of respite. Human beings are capable of accommodating complex mental processes, and it is possible to respond with happiness and joy to pleasurable stimulants, even in the midst of profound grief. In fact your 'happiness response' may be heightened by the context of grief and loss.

The human mind, left to itself, will cope with what it can bear, and find ways of being diverted and comforted. You can't force yourself to cheer up, but it will probably happen at times, if you allow it. It is no betrayal of the lost person or your love for them; nor is it a sign that your grief has ended. Happy periods will come ...and go again, until the process of grief has spent itself.

Behaviours

Crying

This might be prolonged or in brief bursts, violent or quiet. It is the natural outlet for sadness and also for anger, but people vary in their tendency to cry. Dry-eyed grief is no less painful and sad than that expressed in copious tears. Crying may occur when you least expect (or want it), triggered off by some reminder when your guard is down. You may cry alone or in the presence of others. Crying can be a signal to others that you need comfort.

Brooding

Your mind is trying to take in a momentous change and, after initial shock and numbness, it will seek to achieve that by brooding on what has occurred and what the implications are. The bereaved person will often seem 'absent' or 'not with it'. There just isn't spare capacity in the brain for the daily minutiae of life. This can sometimes mean forgetting to eat or attend to routine matters, such as paying bills or even washing.

This can be a particular problem for students, who have other demanding mental tasks, which can be greatly impeded by the need to dwell and brood.

Worry

The combination of confusion, loss of confidence and exposure to unwanted events is likely to cause worrying to occur. Although it doesn't feel like it, worrying is a way of trying to regain control - to be prepared for equivalent events in the future. We can also worry after the event - 'did I do enough?', 'did the deceased suffer?', 'did they know that I loved them?'. Although we can't change what has happened, we will try to.

Scrutinising your own health

Experiencing the death of another may make you nervous for yourself and you may go through a period of watching for every symptom in yourself and interpreting it in a frightening way.

Rituals

We probably need rituals to acknowledge the meaning of death more than for anything else. The rituals of death vary according to culture and may also vary according to personal preference. There is an attempt to acknowledge the value of the life of the deceased and the meaning to the mourner of their death. The ritual may give comfort and a sense of connection with the departed.

Rituals are not confined to those with a religious faith. Visiting places associated with the deceased, keeping photographs, acknowledging anniversaries and other significant dates are all rituals which may be practised.

How to cope

Getting through grief is tough and challenging. There will be bad times, of course. But the best way to cope is to trust the process and just let your feelings carry you through. The painful feelings and thoughts will be helping to confirm the reality of loss to your dazed mind, which will gradually adjust to it in its own good time. Your mind will also protect you, when need be.

Take your time

People are often in a great hurry to recover from grief (as from any pain) and you may be tempted to force the pace. Try to be patient. In a while you will be able to look back and remember without pain, but there's no short-circuiting the process. All that will happen if you try to, is that the inevitable feelings will 'go underground', you will be aware of a very vulnerable place inside that isn't being attended to, and you will be afraid of being overwhelmed. And one day, it might all come bursting out in connection with something else, and you won't be able to make sense of what is happening to you.

Be 'Selfish'

In the past, bereaved people wore black clothes for a period of mourning and had a certain status. It may have helped to give a sense of particular identity to the mourner and to prompt appropriate enquiry. It may have allowed mourners to be kind to themselves. Today, we don't feel the need for the 'uniform', but it's as important as ever to take some space to deal with the bereavement. This is one time to allow yourself to follow your instincts - they are the best guide to what you need and want. You may feel the need to be on your own or to be with a supportive listener or, indeed, a merry crowd. You may want to get on with a task or just drift in reverie.

Particular problems for students

For students, there can be additional worries about being able to concentrate on your studies. For a while, it may be very difficult. But if you allow yourself the space you need, your instincts will prompt you to get back to work when you are ready and you can then forge ahead. Only if you try to fight off the inevitable preoccupation and daydreaming, will it continue to intrude and prevent you from making progress.

Dealing with other people

Few of us feel at ease in the presence of the bereaved, for one very good reason. We are afraid of saying (or not saying) something which will make things worse. And that's a reasonable fear. When someone's resources are already stretched to the limit, they will be very sensitive and vulnerable. So if others seem to desert you in droves in your hour of need, bear in mind that they are probably trying to protect you from themselves.

Again the answer is to take the relaxed 'selfish' approach. Let your friends know what you need and you will find they are all too ready to help. They will relax in the knowledge that you will send them away if you want to be alone, you will talk if you want to pour your heart out, and you will join in shared activities if you want some distraction. It may be hard that when you're already so distressed, it's up to you to take the lead - but it really is the best way to get your needs met. Try thinking about it the other way round - if someone else was in your predicament, wouldn't you want to help? Wouldn't you feel rather anxious? And wouldn't you be pleased if the bereaved person was comfortable enough and trusted you enough to let you know what they wanted from you?

Sometimes the bereaved are anxious about 'burdening' others, especially family members or friends who are also affected by the loss. So everyone tries to be very brave and appear cheerful. This can have the unfortunate effect of each person involved thinking that everyone else is 'coping better' than they are. Perhaps one of the most comforting things to help with the pain of bereavement is to experience the closeness of sharing it with someone similarly affected. So, again, be honest and 'selfish'; trust that others will let you know if you're making it additionally difficult for them.

Being there for a Bereaved person

The bereaved are naturally on edge and sensitive and their moods will change. At the same time they will need human support and comfort more than at any other time. You won't know what to do or say - who could? - but you can show a willingness to be there and to respond to requests from the bereaved person.

Show that you care by seeking the person out on a frequent basis, reminding them that you are available if wanted, but taking your cue from them. Don't feel that it's your job to ease the pain or distract the bereaved person. There's a natural process they need to go through, which may take many different twists and turns. All you need to do is acknowledge and respect that - but don't go away. You may be wanted.

Other experiences of Loss

Other losses which may cause bereavement include: -

- The termination of a pregnancy, whether by natural causes or medical intervention
- Inability to conceive
- Escape or death of a pet
- The ending of a relationship
- Moving house
- Deterioration in health
- Exposure to a traumatic event, such as a road accident, assault or burglary
- Loss of a job
- Loss of youth

There will be others. Bereavement can be expected when you lose someone or something that is precious to you, and if you experience these or any other significant losses, then you will probably experience some of the processes of bereavement. Perhaps the feelings may have a different emphasis - the ending of a relationship, for instance, might provoke more anger; the exposure to a traumatic incident more loss of confidence and security. But the elements are there and you are likely to be preoccupied and absorbed with the experience of loss for a while.

The way to cope is the same as with bereavement through death of a person - go with it, trust the process, ask others for what you feel you need. In time you will recover.