

Life After Loss: Dealing with Grief

The loss of a friend or loved one is among the most traumatic events that a person can experience. Sudden or shocking losses can be even more traumatic. There is no way to prepare. They can challenge your sense of security and confidence in the predictability of life. The emotions of grief and the grieving process are painful but natural, expected and necessary parts of healing and recovery. There is no one way and no right or wrong way to grieve, and there is no schedule or deadline for the resolution of and recovery from loss. Everybody grieves and incorporates the experience of a loss in his or her own way. Nevertheless, many bereaved persons share some common feelings and reactions.

Normal Grief Reactions

When experiencing grief, it is common to feel...

- like you are going crazy
- unable to focus or concentrate
- irritable or angry (at the deceased, oneself, others, or higher powers)
- frustrated or misunderstood
- anxious nervous or fearful
- like you want to "escape"
- guilt or remorse
- ambivalence
- numbness

Grief as a Process of Healing

It is important to note that the grief process is not linear, but is more often experienced in cycles. Grief is sometimes compared to climbing a spiral staircase where things can look and feel like you are just going in circles, yet you are actually making progress. Patience with the process and allowing feelings to come without judgment can help. If you feel stuck in your grief, talking to a counselor or a supportive person may help you move forward in the healing process.

How to Help Yourself

One way to examine your own style of coping is to recall the ways you've dealt with painful times in the past. It's important to note that some ways of coping with grief are helpful, like talking to others, writing in a journal, and so forth. Others may be hurtful or destructive to the healing process, like substance abuse or isolation. Healthy coping skills are important in resolving a loss. They cannot take away your feelings of loss. They can, however, help you move forward in the healing process.

Participate in rituals/say goodbye. Ceremonies and rituals help us to make the "unreal" more real and to move toward accepting and integrating our loss. Attend the funeral or memorial service. Mark important anniversaries in ways that are meaningful to you.

Care for yourself physically. Get adequate rest, nutrition and exercise.

Care for yourself emotionally. Give yourself permission to grieve. Allow quiet time alone to reflect and to explore and experience your thoughts and feelings. Allow time to heal without

setting unrealistic goals and deadlines. Resist/delay making major decisions/changes in your life.

Express your feelings. Allow opportunities to express the full range of your emotions. This includes sadness, but also perhaps, fear, guilt, anger, resentment, and relief. Avoiding emotions through excessive activity, denial, or abuse of substances complicates and prolongs the pain of loss.

Seek support. Gathering and using social support is essential. Support from others reduces isolation and loneliness and increases one's sense of security, safety and attachment. Talk to friends openly about your loss. If religion or spirituality are important to you, talk with a member of the clergy or a spiritual advisor. Consider joining a support group for people who have experienced a similar loss.

Professional Counseling. Students who would like to seek professional counseling are encouraged to contact the University College academic advising office for suggested resources, including providers and clinics which offer sliding scale fees. Washington University employees are encouraged to visit the Work-Life Solutions webpage at <https://hr.wustl.edu/worklife/eap/>.

How to Help a Friend

People who are grieving often feel isolated or lonely in their grief. Soon after the loss, social activities and support from others may decrease. As the shock of the loss fades, there is a tendency on the part of your friend to feel more pain and sadness. Well-meaning friends may avoid discussing the subject due to their own discomfort with grief or their fear of "making the person feel bad." They may "not know what to say."

People who are grieving are likely to fluctuate between wanting some time to themselves and wanting closeness with others. They may want someone to talk to about their feelings. Showing concern and thoughtfulness about a friend shows that you care. It's better to feel nervous and awkward sitting with a grieving friend than to not sit there at all.

- **Talk openly** to the bereaved person about his/her loss and feelings. Don't try to offer false cheer or minimize the loss.
- **Be available.** Call, stop by to talk, share a meal or activity. Your presence and companionship are important.
- **Listen/be patient.** Listening is an often overlooked gift of yourself. Allow the bereaved person to vent feelings. Don't judge the person's thoughts or feelings. Don't feel you need to offer advice. Listening itself is very powerful.
- **Take some action.** Send a card, write a note, call. This is important not just immediately after the loss, but especially later, when grief is still intense but when others have resumed their daily lives and support for the bereaved may dwindle.
- **Accept your own limitations.** Accept that you cannot eliminate the pain your friend is experiencing. Grief is a natural, expected response to loss and each person must work through it in his/her own way and at his/her own pace. Be supportive, but care for yourself too.