

Grief: Coping with the Death of a Loved One

Definition

Grief is a continuing process of mourning through which one learns to live with loss.

Overview

When a loved one dies, those left to mourn, or *survivors*, often find themselves entangled in a complex web of emotions and reactions. The death of a loved one can be an overwhelming, frightening and painful experience. The psychological, social and physical effects of loss are articulated through the practice of grief.

How individuals grieve depends on many factors: their support system; the circumstances of the death; the response by family members, friends and the criminal justice system; the nature of the relationship with the deceased; religious or cultural beliefs and customs; and the individual's coping skills. No two people will grieve in the same way. However, survivors often find it helpful to speak with others experiencing loss, as there are common reactions and experiences that may prove useful to share.

Possible Grief Reactions:

Denial

Often after learning of the death of a loved one, especially a sudden death, survivors experience a feeling of shock, numbness and disbelief that their loved one is gone. To be confronted by the death of a loved one is so horrible, devastating and absolute that many individuals are unable to comprehend the overwhelming news. Therefore, in order to process the shock, many survivors will immediately disbelieve that a loved one has died. Denial is a coping mechanism and a normal and functional grief reaction.

Anger

As the reality of facing life without a loved one sets in, many survivors feel frustrated, cheated and abandoned. Those left to grieve may become angry at their loved one for leaving them; at the doctors who should have done more; at other family members for not having the same feelings; and, in a case of death as a result of a violent crime, at the person or persons responsible for the crime, as well as the entire criminal justice system.

When death occurs as a result of a violent crime, survivors' anger may be compounded and their reactions more complicated. Many homicide survivors are surprised and frightened by the intensity of anger and violence they feel toward those who killed their loved one(s). Homicide survivors may devise elaborate plans of revenge that involve the murderer suffering more cruelly and graphically than the victim. To fantasize acting out rage or revenge is a normal reaction for a bereaved survivor. By verbalizing these feelings, perhaps within a support group setting, survivors can try to move past the anger toward healing.

Guilt

Survivors may encounter intense feelings of guilt after someone they love has died. The guilt may come out of unresolved conflicts with the deceased, or through thinking they could have somehow prevented the death of their loved one. While guilt is a normal grief reaction, most often factors outside a survivor's control cause death. Therefore, it may help to process feelings of guilt to speak with individuals who knew the loved one, as well as the circumstances of the death, so that they may help the survivor realistically evaluate feelings of guilt and responsibility.

Other Common Grief Reactions Include:

- Feelings of powerlessness;
- Numbness;
- Hypersensitivity;
- Hyper-vigilance (jumpiness);
- Overwhelming sense of loss and sorrow;
- Disruptive sleep patterns;
- Inability to concentrate;
- Lethargy;
- Fear and vulnerability;
- Confusion;
- Social withdrawal;
- Change in eating habits
- Restricted affect (reduced ability to express emotion);
- Questioning of faith;
- Physical and financial problems; and
- Constant thoughts about the circumstances of the death.

Grief Spasms

Survivors may feel, even years after the loss of a loved one, brief periods when feelings of loss are particularly intense. These "grief spasms" are usually brought about by "triggers." Triggers are occasions, scents, tastes, songs, or other stimuli which remind survivors of their loved one and loss. For example, birthdays, anniversaries, weddings, or driving by the scene of a drunk driving crash may bring about intense feelings of grief for those learning to cope with loss. As time passes, most survivors find that grief spasms lose their intensity and frequency, and are a normal part of processing the loss of a loved one.

Suggestions for Coping with the Death of a Loved One

- *Support groups/counseling.* In adjusting to their lives after the loss of a loved one, many survivors find it helpful to share their feelings with others who are in similar circumstances. Many communities have support groups established through hospitals, churches or social service agencies that lend an atmosphere of support and empathy, which may normalize a survivor's reactions.
- *Counseling* with a professional therapist may be an option as well, for assistance and guidance through the grieving process. To maximize benefits from counseling, survivors should look for counselors experienced in dealing with grief issues. If a death is a result of a violent crime, survivors may be able to receive reimbursement or direct payment for counseling expenses through their state's crime victims' compensation program. For more information about the compensation program in a particular state, survivors should contact local law enforcement or prosecutor's office.
- *Acknowledge feelings of loss.* Though emotions may be difficult, it is important for survivors to work through feelings of sorrow, anger, guilt, and other demonstrations of loss, and not be afraid to express them. Expressive outlets, such as conversations with others, drawing or writing, may prove helpful in articulating and coping with feelings of loss. Survivors should be patient with themselves. The grieving process takes time, and feelings of loss may not diminish quickly or easily.
- *Be patient with others.* Many people, though well-meaning, can say inappropriate things to those who grieve. Most often people simply do not know what to say, and want to help, not hurt. An inappropriate remark may be an imperfect but well-intentioned expression of caring.
- *Recognize limits.* At first, survivors should expect to feel a multitude of emotions that may make it hard to cope with everyday tasks. If possible, survivors should seek to engage a strong support system, asking others to assist in the grieving process or to take over tasks that may prove too difficult or painful. Survivors may also want to have regular checkups with a physician in order to monitor possible stress-related physical ailments.

To Assist Someone Who is Grieving

- *Ask what can be done to help.* Someone who has experienced the loss of a loved one may need assistance with daily tasks, but may be unable to ask. Offer to help with logistical tasks such as phone calls to funeral directors, acquaintances, and credit card companies, or offer to babysit young children or care for pets.
- *Listen.* Listen without making any judgements. Survivors may need to periodically speak with someone about what they are experiencing and feeling. It may be helpful to be available to a survivor to talk not only immediately after the loss, but occasionally thereafter, and especially on significant dates and holidays.
- *Provide information and support.* Find out if there are appropriate and available support groups in the survivor's area. If the criminal justice system is involved, investigate services available to survivors through the system and the appropriate person(s) to call for further information and assistance. If there are legal issues, offer to call prospective attorneys.

Conclusion

The grief process is often characterized as work because it is laborious and difficult. There is no timetable for grieving and everyone will manage the loss of a loved one differently. Loss forces survivors to readjust their lives in order to compensate and cope. Grief can be a long, painful process, but can be managed with assistance from friends, family members, or outside support. Survivors need to engage others in the grief process if possible, as doing so may assist them in attempting to reconstruct their lives after loss.

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