

Coping with Grief and Loss

What Is Grief?

Grief is the sadness that is experienced after a loss. Loss can be experienced through death, abandonment, incarceration, divorce, separation, breakup, illness, unemployment, moving, or access to friends and activities. Grief is a part of life. Everyone experiences grief and everyone is changed by grief.

Psychologists have identified five common stages that people might go through following a loss. It should be noted that none of these stages are set. Everyone enters these stages at different times, spends a different amount of time in each stage, and may revisit a stage, sometimes more than once, or skip one or more stages entirely. While it's important to recognize that everyone grieves in their own way and in their own time, understanding these stages may help a person process their own grief or understand a friend or loved one who is dealing with grief.

Denial

Denial is most commonly experienced immediately following the loss when a person's life has suddenly changed. During the denial stage, a person may feel confusion about why the loss happened or fear about the future. Sometimes a person may feel a false sense of hope that the loss didn't actually happen. Denial is part of a natural defense system that allows the body to adjust to the reality of the loss. It is important to take the time needed to accept the loss.

Anger

When reality of the loss sinks in, people often feel angry. Sometimes this anger is directed at oneself because the person feels like there is something they could have done to prevent the loss. Other times the anger is directed at someone else – someone who they think should have been able to prevent the loss or sometimes at the person themselves. During this stage, it is important for the person to express their feelings by talking to a trusted person or writing in a journal. It's also helpful for the person to find healthy outlets for their anger such as through music, exercise, art, being outdoors, etc.

Bargaining

During the bargaining stage a person negotiates in an attempt to reverse the loss. During this stage, a person may feel guilt or blame. They may have many thoughts of what if or if only. They may struggle to find meaning in their life or worry about not ever having a 'normal' life again. During this stage, it is important to reach out to others for emotional support and to feel connected.

Depression

Often the most noticeable stage that a person experiences following a loss is depression. During this stage a person might experience a sense of emptiness and lack of motivation. They might feel overwhelmed or helpless. They might avoid others or stop engaging in everyday activities. Like all of the stages, depression is normal following a loss. But it is also important to encourage the person to continue to express their feelings and take care of themselves. It is also important to seek professional help if the person is having thoughts of suicide or over-indulging in alcohol or drugs.

Acceptance

During the acceptance stage, a person begins to feel like themselves and plan for the future. They accept the reality of the loss and make adjustments to their new reality.

Grief in Adults

Grief is a normal response to loss and it is important to remember that the grieving process takes time. Self-care is essential for physical, social, and emotional health, especially during a time of grief. The following are some suggestions that may help you or someone you know process the grief.

Feel the Emotions

It is important to feel the emotions that come along with the loss. Taking time to identify, accept, and express one's emotions, can help a person cope with grief. Trying to ignore emotions may only prolong the pain of the loss.

- Keep a journal. Write in a bounded journal or a spiral notebook or purchase a journal designed to help process grief.
- Watch movies or read books about characters who experience grief. Have a good cry or allow any emotions that come up to flow.
- Start a creative project. Try painting, drawing, writing music or poetry, or redecorating.

Stay Connected

When experiencing any kind of a loss, it is important to reach out and connect with others. Don't feel like you must be strong in order to protect others. Talking about your feelings will help and others.

- Talk about your feelings to a trusted friend or mental health professional.
- Share stories with others who have experienced loss. Join a support group or talk with friends or family members.
- Support others who are also grieving.

Pay Tribute

In the case of a loss such as death, it can be helpful to take time to pay tribute to that person.

- Spend time doing something in their memory.
- Write a letter or poem to the person.
- Make a scrapbook, video, collage, social media post, or other tangible memorial.
- Plan ahead for days that may trigger feelings of loss for the person, such as birthdays, anniversaries, or holidays. Think of ways to remember the person such listening to a special song, visiting their grave, looking at photos, or spending time in a place they enjoyed.

Let Time Heal

Don't buy into the myth that grief should last a year. Everyone experiences grief differently. For some the grief process will take less time. For others, grief may be processed for a lifetime. But when grief starts to feel overwhelming, it is okay to take a break or get away for a little while.

- Attend a theatre or music performance, visit a museum, go out for dinner, go for a hike, or watch a movie with family or friends.
- Plan a vacation, a staycation, or a weekend get-away. Changing scenery can sometimes help during times of grief.
- Find time for self-care – exercise, meditate, take a bath, get a massage, play with a child or pet, or whatever helps reduce stress.