

## Understanding grief and loss

Grief is the intense sorrow a person feels when they lose someone or something very important to them. Loss is an inevitable part of human life, and grief is a normal process that takes time to work through. No two people grieve and heal in the same way, and there is no right or wrong way to grieve a loss.

The intensity of our grief, how long it lasts, and our reactions to it will differ from person to person. Grief is most often associated with the loss of a loved one through death, however people can experience grief through the loss of other important factors in their life. This could include:

- ◆ Loss of property or treasured possessions in natural disaster
- ◆ Death of a pet
- ◆ Loss of health (through illness, ageing or an accident)
- ◆ Loss of job, income or business
- ◆ Change in work circumstances (redundancy, retirement)
- ◆ Change in place (moving to a new house, relocation)
- ◆ Change in relationships (divorce, separation, relationship breakdown)
- ◆ Miscarriage or abortion
- ◆ Hopes and dreams that haven't been realised
- ◆ Changes through different stages of life (children growing up, changes through ageing)

Grief is not always understood and is a different process for everyone. It often involves intense feelings and emotions, and many people will feel deep pain. The grieving process is necessary following a loss to help bring back a feeling of equilibrium and stability.

There is no set timeframe for a grievance process and for some people, it may last years as they learn how to cope beyond their loss. Every grieving process is unique and may depend on their previous experiences of grief, their support network, personality traits and coping mechanisms.

## Common reactions to grief

There is no 'correct' way to grieve. Some people describe grieving as a roller coaster in its unpredictability and even the same person will grieve differently depending on the specific loss they are experiencing. For some, grief will come and go and for others it will be constant; some people will cry while others won't; it helps some people to discuss their grief, while others prefer not to talk at all. While some feelings can be frightening and confusing, be reassured that no matter what your experience is, there is no right or wrong way to grieve so whatever you are feeling is completely normal.

It is generally accepted that there are five main stages of grief, though people will move through these at different paces, in different orders and may repeat certain stages multiple times or not experience every stage. The five stages of grief are:

1. **Denial and isolation** – “this isn't happening”, “this can't be happening”
2. **Anger** – aimed at ourselves, our loved ones, objects, situations
3. **Bargaining** – “if only”, “I would give anything if only ...”
4. **Depression** – sadness, confusion, worry, fear, anxiety
5. **Acceptance** – accepting the reality of the loss

While there are no set responses or stages of grief, some common reactions include:

- ◆ Crying
- ◆ Numbness, shock, denial
- ◆ Overwhelming feeling of loss
- ◆ Longing to change the situation
- ◆ Confusion, poor memory, difficult concentrating and making decisions
- ◆ Guilt, despair, resentment
- ◆ Questioning (why did this happen?)
- ◆ Change in sleeping habits / disrupted sleeping
- ◆ Idealisation of the person/situation that has been lost
- ◆ Anxiety, panic
- ◆ Hopelessness
- ◆ Anger
- ◆ Change in appetite
- ◆ Loneliness

Many people will experience their grief and loss all over again when anniversaries inevitably come around, or at important times or the year such as Christmas, birthdays and at family events. These occasions can be difficult and offering support and assistance at these times are likely to be appreciated.

## Navigating through grief and loss

Everyone will discover their own way to grieve. These tips may help you through your grieving process:

- ◆ **Don't isolate yourself too much** – your family and friends are there to offer support and want to help
- ◆ **Maintain a healthy diet** – it can be tempting to indulge in comfort foods or not eat at all, but nourishing your body will help you keep your energy levels up
- ◆ **Exercise when you can** – even a short walk can help you feel like you've accomplished something, and exercise releases 'happy endorphins' that may help you feel better
- ◆ **Avoid alcohol and other substances** – even if you feel the need to 'numb the pain'
- ◆ **Talk about how you're feeling** – opening up to family and friends can help you understand and accept your loss. If you don't feel comfortable talking to your friends, you could join a support group, or you might like to write down your feelings instead.
- ◆ **Do something you enjoy** – it could be as simple as taking a warm bath or catching up with friends. It's important to try to enjoy yourself when you can, even if you are in pain
- ◆ **Take small steps** – if you are feeling overwhelmed, don't set yourself big goals that will be difficult to achieve – break it down into smaller, more manageable goals until you reach your end goal
- ◆ **Seek help** – it's okay to get help if you need it

You may experience your grief and loss again on anniversaries, or at family events and significant dates throughout the year. These occasions may be difficult but remember that there is no timeline for grief.

## Providing support to someone who is grieving

Having a support system in place can help people through their grieving process. You can support someone through their grief by:

- ◆ Being physically present if they are feeling up for visitors
- ◆ Listening to them if they feel comfortable talking
- ◆ Acknowledging their loss – it's okay to talk about it and might help them process their feelings
- ◆ Helping them with day to day tasks including cooking, cleaning and childcare (check they would like your help first)
- ◆ Help them establish a routine
- ◆ Allow them to grieve at their own pace – remember there is no right way or time to grieve
- ◆ Assure them that their feelings are normal
- ◆ Encourage them to take small steps to help them feel more in control of their life
- ◆ Talk with them about their loss
- ◆ Assist them in making decisions, but try not to decide for them
- ◆ Don't encourage them to numb the pain through alcohol or other substances