

A Practical Guide to Coping with Grief

Understanding the Grief Process

Grief is a natural response to loss that requires time to resolve. Coping with grief depends on many factors, from personal beliefs to one's current stressors. Feelings associated with grief can be overwhelming, and getting through each day may be difficult. There are no clear guidelines for the grief process. Each person will resolve their grief in their own time and in their own way. However, there are five common stages related to coping with grief. When reflecting on these stages, it's important to note that not everyone will go through all the stages. Some people may skip over a stage whereas others may find themselves going back and forth between different stages.

Stages of Grief

Denial and isolation. This is the initial reaction when confronted with loss. At first, the event seems unbelievable. Shock and numbness are two common emotions associated with this stage. Common thoughts: "This can't be happening!"

Anger. Once the shock of the loss has subsided, it is common to feel anger—anger that the loss took place, anger at oneself or others for letting it happen, and anger at the "unfair" world. Anger may be displaced onto others or towards oneself. This is usually the most difficult stage to manage. Human nature wants to blame someone or something for the loss. Common thoughts: "Why is this happening to me?"

Bargaining. This is an attempt to postpone grieving for the loss. Bargaining may involve a conversation with a higher power. Common thoughts: "If you make this go away, I promise I will be more patient/kind/compassionate."

Depression. Anger may be replaced by feelings of profound sadness which, in turn, can lead to feelings of depression and a sense of helplessness. This is a typical reaction to grief. Common thoughts: "It's no use. This pain will never go away."

Acceptance. The grieving person is now ready to accept the reality of what has taken place. The grieving process cannot be resolved until there is acceptance of the loss. Once that happens, one is able to move forward because the loss has been put in its proper context. Common thoughts: "I acknowledge that this loss has been painful, but I can get through this."

Sometimes the circumstances surrounding the loss can make the grieving process complicated. For example, a sudden or unnatural death makes the grieving process more difficult. It can also be difficult to accept when a young person/child dies. Often there are feelings of guilt and helplessness following the death of a loved one. It is common to feel guilt and think: "Why couldn't I have done something to prevent this from happening?" This is referred to as "survivor's guilt" and is regarded as a normal reaction to loss.

It is important to allow oneself the time to process the event and to talk through the different feelings one may be experiencing. Death is a sad occasion, and while it is important to grieve the loss of a loved one, do not forget to honor his or her life.

Additional Information

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Strategies for Coping

- > **Share your feelings.** Express your feelings as they arise. Take time to cry, if needed. Share your feelings with others as they may feel the same way as you. Mutual support can help you get through the grieving process. Some people even find a cathartic release from writing a letter to the deceased, expressing their feelings.
- > **Find someone you trust.** Talk with a family member or close friend about your grief.
- > **Take care of yourself.** Accept offers of help and companionship from those around you. Get enough rest and eat regularly. If you are irritable from lack of sleep or if you are not eating regularly, you will have less energy to cope.
- > **Make daily decisions.** This will give you a feeling of control over your life. Know your limits and don't make major changes. If a problem is beyond your control and cannot be changed, accept it.
- > **Maintain your daily routine.** This will give you a feeling of control over your life and bring a sense of normalcy.
- > **Practice relaxation and meditation.** Create a quiet scene. You can't always get away from a situation, but you can visualize a quiet scene or a walk along the beach. Such visualization will temporarily remove you from your present situation and allow you to relax.
- > **Take one thing at a time.** At this time, any ordinary workload may seem overwhelming. Perform one task at a time until the project is completed.
- > **Allow extra time.** If you usually plan half an hour to complete a specific task, schedule forty-five minutes to complete it. Do the best you can. Don't be too critical of yourself.
- > **Take a break.** Reading a favorite book or watching a favorite TV program will give you the break that you may need to relax.
- > **Be patient.** Mourning takes time. It is common to have a roller-coaster of emotions for a while. Don't force yourself through the grief process. Be patient while you are experiencing different emotions over short period of time.

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Common Reactions to Grief

I. Physical Reactions

- > Fatigue
- > Sadness
- > Insomnia
- > Headaches
- > Crying spells
- > Loss of appetite

II. Cognitive Reactions

- > Confusion
- > Hyper-vigilance
- > Intrusive memory
- > Recurrent thoughts
- > Lack of concentration

III. Emotional Reactions

- > Anger
- > Denial
- > Anxiety
- > Irritability
- > Depression
- > Apprehension
- > Grief and sadness

IV. Behavioral Reactions

- > Emotional outbursts
- > Avoidance of others
- > Impaired work performance
- > Increase in alcohol consumption
- > Increased interpersonal conflicts
- > Decreased interests in usual activities

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Common Myths Regarding Grief

Myth: The pain will go away faster if you ignore it.

Fact: Trying to ignore your pain will only make it worse in the long run. For real healing to occur, it is necessary to actively deal with it.

Myth: It's important to "be strong" in the face of your loss.

Fact: Feeling sad, frightened, or lonely is a normal reaction to loss. Crying doesn't mean you are weak. You don't need to protect your family/friends by putting on a brave front. Showing your true feelings can help them and you to deal with the loss.

Myth: Grieving should last no longer than a year.

Fact: There is no specific time frame for grieving. How long it takes differs from person to person. Take the time you need.

Myth: If you don't cry, it means you are not grieving.

Fact: Crying is a normal response to sadness, but it's not the only one. Those who don't cry may feel the pain just as deeply as others. They may simply have other ways of showing it.

Myth: Going to counseling or a support group is always helpful.

Fact: Research shows that there is no significant difference between individuals who participated in counseling versus those who did not. Everyone copes in their own way. It's important to find what works for you.

Myth: Moving on with your life means you are forgetting about the person who died.

Fact: Moving on means you've accepted the reality of the individual's death which is not the same as forgetting.

Myth: The goal is to get over the grief.

Fact: We live in a society that is both afraid of death and afraid of emotions. We are not encouraged to express our emotions and many people view grief as something to get over rather than experience. Grief is a process which should not be rushed. Give yourself time to grieve.

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Dos and Don'ts During the Grief Process

People who experience grief may often demonstrate changes in behavior. These suggestions will help reduce the probability of long-term reactions.

Dos

- > Get enough rest.
- > Maintain regular diet.
- > Follow a familiar routine.
- > Take one thing at a time
- > Talk to supportive people.
- > Maintain an exercise regimen.
- > Spend time with family/friends.
- > Expect the experience to upset you.
- > Contact your EAP, if your reactions persist.
- > Expect a range of emotions- this is normal.
- > Forgive yourself for what you did or didn't do.
- > Accept the ups and downs of grieving.

Don'ts

- > Don't stay away from work.
- > Don't withdraw from others.
- > Don't look for easy answers.
- > Don't increase caffeine intake.
- > Don't reduce leisure activities.
- > Don't make major life changes.
- > Don't drink alcohol excessively.
- > Don't take on new major projects.
- > Don't have unrealistic expectations.
- > Don't expect yourself to get better in a day.

Please contact your EAP, if your reactions persist.

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