

About Loss

Loss is a universal occurrence, and grief is a natural response to loss. Individuals may react to loss differently, and grieving can take many forms; there is no one right way to experience and process grief.

While almost any change can be experienced as a loss (a retirement, a divorce, a child leaving home), the death of someone we know can hit us particularly hard. A death of someone we care about can cause us pain—pain in the loss of that person, and pain as it reminds us of other losses we have experienced.

Recent research has shown that resilience is a hallmark of the human spirit. It is still important to acknowledge some of the effects we may feel when we experience a loss, and review some of the ways we can help ourselves move through the grief.

Definitions

- **Loss**—state of being without something one has had
- **Bereavement**—state of being deprived of something, especially the loss of a loved one by death
- **Grief**—deep or intense sorrow or distress, especially at the death of someone
- **Mourning**—grief, or the actions or expressions of one who's suffered a bereavement

The Experience of Loss

- Grief can be a physical experience—a lack of appetite, a sense of shock and numbness, a gnawing stomach ache, an inability to sleep, a sensation of moving through mud, a flood of tears.
- Grief can be an emotional experience—a feeling of despair, a deep sadness, an intense anger, a sense of guilt, a sustained irritability.
- Grief can be a cognitive experience—an ongoing review of what happened, a questioning of what we might have done to change things, a rumination on what we do now.
- Grief can be a spiritual experience—a questioning of our faith, a fear that we have been abandoned.

More than likely, grief can affect us on multiple levels, which is what causes us so much difficulty, because it feels like so many of our resources have been depleted.

What May Help

- Take moments to acknowledge the loss and the accompanying grief. This does not mean that you have to focus on it non-stop, but trying to avoid the grief will not make it go away.
- Your grief may at times seem paralyzing, and you may be numb, aware that you don't feel anything at all. This is a way for you to be protected as you slowly absorb the reality of the loss.
- At times, your grief may seem like an endless ocean storm, where the undercurrents build and the waves overwhelm. If possible, go with the wave, while remembering that each time a wave occurs it will recede, and over time, storms do end. Let yourself ride the painful crests of the waves, be aware that they will recede, and recognize those moments of relative calm.
- You may come to recognize a pattern to your grief—a time of day when it's particularly difficult, or a location where something is triggered in you. If possible, plan for those moments, and prepare yourself as best you can. Call a friend, listen to music that soothes you, go for a walk, or indulge in a healthy, familiar routine. Do something that has the potential to give you a flicker of relief even if it is fleeting.
- Actively seek to take care of yourself. This may involve continuing to go to work, or taking a break from work. It may include gathering many people around you, or it may involve making a list of people to whom you can reach out when you are feeling unsteady.
- Make plans to engage in some of your regular activities, while giving yourself leeway to take a break when needed.
- Focus on healthy habits and helpful people—reach out to someone who can listen: a friend, a family member, an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselor, a spiritual or religious guide, a trusted doctor. Avoid making any big decisions, avoid use of substances such as alcohol or drugs, and do not isolate yourself.

Timelines

- There are no clear timelines for grieving or bereavement, as this varies from person to person, according to temperament, the loss, past experience, and other factors.
- According to George Bonanno, Ph.D., a professor and researcher at Columbia University, it may be helpful to think about the course of grieving as usually following one of the three patterns below:
 - Resilience pattern—acute pain for a few days to weeks, which then subsides; these individuals still care and grieve but can go on successfully with daily life (1/3 to 2/3 of those bereaved)
 - Recovery pattern—intense suffering for a few months to a year; gradually these individuals begin to feel more like they did before the loss, although the hurt is still felt
 - Chronic or prolonged grief pattern—ongoing struggle without relief; for these individuals the grief worsens over time

Keeping these patterns in mind may help as you go through your own particular journey, and will help inform you as to when it might be useful to reach out for help. For those who feel consumed by a loss, for those who feel life may not be worth living, for those who continue to blame themselves, for those who can't resume daily functioning, the help of a trusted professional is crucial.

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