AN OVERVIEW OF GRIEF AND MOURNING

- Grief is not understood in our society, and mourners are expected to recover quickly. Be gentle with yourself during the many ups and downs.
- The experience is unique to each person, yet there is much you will have in common with others. Guard against putting expectations on your partner and others.
- Tears are healthy and acceptable as you process the pain following the death of your loved one. Cry freely and do not apologize for tears.
- Grief affects your eating and sleeping habits, your energy level, and your ability to concentrate. A balanced diet, adequate fluids, moderate physical exercise, and rest are especially important during the mourning period. Have a check-up if you have physical symptoms.
- Alcohol and sedatives can cloud thinking and slow down the bereavement process. Use prescribed medications sparingly and only under supervision.
- Friends and relatives may avoid you and talking of the death of your loved one. Let them know you need to talk about your loved one and that it helps to talk. Share with them as you can.
- Search for listening friends and/or others with a similar experience to help you through this time.
- Delay major decisions at least a year (changing jobs or home, another pregnancy, etc.).
- Keep your loved one’s clothes and other preparations until you are ready to decide what you want to do. Time is needed in making a good decision about these things.
- Suicidal thoughts may occur and are normal. The meaning in life will return in time. The pain does lessen. Talk over feelings with a trusted friend as they surface.
- Express your guilt feelings and thoughts. They may be illogical to some, so share them with a listening person who will help you explore and forgive yourself in time.
- Anger is a common and normal response, although it may be unacceptable to you and difficult for others to witness. Find healthy and safe ways to express anger (e.g. beat a pillow).
- Your anger may be directed toward God. You may feel that your faith has weakened as you question past strong beliefs. Tell God how you feel and talk to those who can help you explore. Your faith can help you through this time, yet expressing doubts and feelings aids in processing what you are experiencing.
- Include your children in your grief. Do not hide your tears from them, but be open and honest about your own feelings. They, too, are grieving and need an avenue to express their feelings. They need to be included and to feel your love. You may find it helpful to find a close family member who can supply what you are not able to give at this time.
- Holiday and anniversary times are reminders of your empty arms. Plan ahead to avoid some of the added stress. Do not expect others to remember or be sensitive to how you might feel. Lower expectations on yourself. Take time for your needs.
- Mutual help groups put you in touch with others having a similar experience. By sharing, deeper feelings will surface and can then be processed in an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance. Know that you are not alone. There are others who understand and who care.

Courtesy of the National SHARE Office, St. Joseph Health Center, 300 First Capitol Drive, St. Charles, Missouri 63301-2893
Coping with Grief: A Difficult but Important Journey

When we lose someone we love, it is the most normal thing in the world for us to experience grief. In fact, it is almost impossible for humans to experience loss without feeling some kind of grief.
But grief does not come easily – most of us are afraid to let ourselves feel it. Grief can be painful, confusing, and overwhelming in its intensity. And unfortunately, it is also common for us to have expectations about how we “should” feel when someone dies. This can make grieving even more difficult.

It is important to remember that each person’s experience of grief is unique – and there is no one kind of grief, and there is certainly no right kind. Yet, there are some things about grief that are universal, that is, we all share them. It is here that we find ways to help ourselves and to get help from others, to recover from our grief and begin to move past it. Grief is the process of how we accept the loss of a loved one.

WHAT GRIEF IS; WHAT GRIEF IS NOT

Because grief is not just a single thing, many people wonder whether their reaction to the loss of a loved one is normal. In almost every case, the answer is an unqualified yes, even if it doesn’t feel that way to you.

You may find it comforting to know that most people question how they feel when someone they love dies. They worry that they are too upset by it, or not upset enough. Grief, many people say, is like being on an emotional roller-coaster, and many different feelings, such as anger, can surface. Again, all of this is normal.

If you are going through this yourself, you may find it helpful to hear what others have felt, thought, and learned about grief. Here are some of the things they have shared:

Grief can be physical. Many people feel a physical sense of loss and even physical pain. Besides tears, grief can bring a sense of emptiness, a loss of appetite, a heaviness or pain in your chest, an inability to sleep, forgetfulness, a sense of being lost, restlessness, difficulty concentrating, headaches, or even dizziness. If any of these physical symptoms appear regularly, or do not go away, it is a good idea to discuss them with your physician.

Grief can be confusing. A variety of conflicting emotions can arise when someone dies: intense love can be mixed with anger over being abandoned by you loved one, or with guilt for wanting to live on yourself. You may feel overwhelmed by your feelings, even the smallest ones, but at the same time feel very disconnected from the experience of your loss or from others.

Grief can seem overwhelming. Being preoccupied with everything about the one you have lost is very common: thinking about them all of the time, dreaming about them, feeling suddenly overwhelmed by the pain of loss, or even feeling that they are still alive and with you. This can lead to feelings of regret about things that did or did not happen, and the shock of remembering things about them that you thought you had forgotten.

Grief can make you unsure. Questioning what you are doing with your life, not being interested in things that you usually are engaged with, and feeling suddenly angry or sullen about others, are all normal reactions to loss.

Because so many of us have expectations about grief, it is also important to understand what grief is not. Often, we can be very angry or disappointed in ourselves over what we feel or don’t feel.
REMEMBER THAT:


Grief is not an indicator of how much we loved someone we have lost. It also is not a measure of how worthy we were to the loved one as a parent, a spouse, or a family member.

Grief is not something that has to be “solved.” Sometimes it is important for us to confront it, but it is not something anyone can go around or get away from. It is a natural process that takes time to unfold. Many people have said they eventually learned that there is no shortcut through the pain of grief.

Grief takes time. Just when you think it may be over, your grief can resurface by hearing a favorite song, or seeing, smelling, or touching something that reminds you of the one you have lost. Don’t despair – grief takes time, and although it may sometimes feel that you will never get past it, you will.

Grief is not an end, or the end of the person you have lost. Rather, it is the beginning of the process of healing, and the first step in accepting the pain of separation.

WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOURSELF, AND HOW OTHERS CAN HELP YOU

Remember that this can be an extremely difficult time for you, and you need to take care of yourself. There are things you can do to help yourself cope with grief; some of them may seem obvious, but they are important to remember.

- Remember that experiencing grief, however difficult it may seem to you, is normal. Don’t avoid it, or try to “make it go away.” Everyone needs help with grief. Don’t be afraid to reach out and ask for help.
- Don’t expect your grief to go away quickly, or suddenly. It takes time and does not happen all at once. Be prepared to have good days and bad days.
- Try to maintain your own physical health, and postpone things – like major life decisions – until you feel ready to face them. Many people find that mild physical exercise, like walking, helps them feel better. A new hobby or interest can also help you find “time off” from yourself.
- Your own sense of spirituality, no matter what religion of beliefs you have, can be a great source of strength during difficult times.
- Having others around you can be a great source of strength during this time. Finding supportive counseling, whether one-to-one or with a group, can be a critically important piece of your support network, and can provide you with a “place” where your grief is understood, accepted, and shared.
- Finally, whatever you are feeling, don’t be afraid to accept it in yourself, and share it with others, especially with family or friends whom you trust. Many people find speaking to others who have been through a similar situation to be a great comfort.

NOTES:
Healing Rituals

What are the rituals and why do we need them? When we grieve in the face of a profound loss, we search for meaning and healing. Where can we search for meaning? How can we find healing? One of the paths into healing – into wholeness – is through ritual.

Ritual is a powerful component in our relationship to healing through loss. Ritual represents an act of participation in the face of events where we feel utterly helpless and passive. Beginning in the Old Testament when Joseph asked the Pharaoh for seven days to bury and mourn for his father, we are given a seed for the ritual observance of grief.

Yes, we are each different and our needs in the face of loss will reflect that; however, the Judaic model gives us a framework to at least guide us through the times of our grief. This framework is as valid for someone whose home has burned down as for someone newly diagnosed with a catastrophic illness or someone dealing with death.

THE FIRST WEEK

From the moment we hear of a profound loss, we need to take ourselves out of circulation. There is no sense in making believe nothing has happened. Stop. Cancel the party, speaking engagement, or opening night. Yes. The show must not go on. There has been a tear in the fabric of your life and it requires mending. No safety pins! For the first week following a loss, consider staying out of your ordinary reality. Cancel all obligations and go inside. Go inside yourself, inside your home, with trusted allies and friends, be they in the form of people, books, tapes, or nature. Go where you can hear wisdom voices speaking to you and not on the five o’clock news! The voices in your mind are beginning to form a place where you will hold this loss. Take the time to listen. Since each loss is unique, you can adjust how long and how deeply you want to disconnect from your ordinary reality but there is great wisdom in the face of a death in your inner circle to take a full week. Time does not heal, but healing takes time.

Shiva comes from the Hebrew word “sheva,” seven. For seven days ask nothing of yourself. All professional and personal responsibilities are canceled. You are instead held, fed, and cared for by family and friends. The you that was in relationship to what feels lost has died. Do you have time to sit for a week with your own death?

THE FIRST MONTH

Returning to ordinary reality at the end of a week asks a great deal of us. It asks us to trust life enough to return to it. In the face of profound loss, we take baby steps back into life. What kinds of places call to you? Listen to your inner promptings. Who are the people to whom you feel drawn? Who repels you? Listen. Few of us can afford to climb into bed and pull the covers up. Most of us need to engage responsibilities around work and families. This is a safety net so that we don’t withdraw totally. On the other hand, getting back to normal is not possible in the face of having to re-define normal. Take the time.

THE FIRST YEAR

There is no closure or completion in the face of loss. This is a fallacy too many of us hear and then wonder “What is wrong with me? Why don’t I feel closure?” There is no completion but there is integration. As we move through the cycles of time that circumscribe our lives – the day, the week, the month and the year – our losses are woven into the fabric of our being.

The first year asks us to be gentle with ourselves. To remember that our core has been dismembered, torn apart, by loss. Healing takes time and healing is an active process! We must step up to our grief, meet it, embrace it, and invite it into our lives. Once we do that, grief begins to teach us. The first year is a year of firsts! We need to give ourselves 365 mornings where we awaken into the self that contains our loss. Don’t short-change yourself one day. It’s your time to heal.