

Grief and Mourning

Grief

Grief is the internal expression of our loss, it's our thoughts and feelings, our emotional and behavioural response to the death of a loved one. Grief is our body's way of working through difficult and traumatic experiences. It's important to remember that grief is a normal and healthy reaction to a loss, and it is not helpful to ourselves or our loved ones to try and "get rid" of or ignore our grief. The harsh reality that is so painful for many is that in order to heal our grief, we need to allow ourselves to feel the pain.

Mourning

Every culture will have it's own customs and rituals for mourning loved ones. Whilst grief is our internal response, mourning is the outward expression of our grief, our external shared response to the loss, and it is influenced by our social and cultural rituals. Mourning, like grief is a process, not a state. Traditional rituals like the funeral are the external way we express our grief and is the collective way to honour the deceased and offer emotional and physical support to those who are grieving.



"What we have once enjoyed deeply we can never lose. All that we love deeply becomes a part of us"
Helen Keller

Mourning in the Current Climate

In the current climate, with quarantine rules and social distancing we have not been able to collectively mourn in the way we have in the past. Coping can be more difficult when the crucial chance to say goodbye in person has been denied, leaving us without a sense of closure. Our normal routines and rhythms around death and dying are upended and we are left feeling a range of difficult emotions; powerless, angry, sad, lonely, isolated, often guilt, and without the usual ways to express these heavy, often overwhelming feelings.

Not being able to turn to others for support in the normal way, our inability to engage in the usual traditions and rituals that support us through the grieving process can make it more difficult to come to terms with the reality of the death. And this makes it much harder to cope with the loss. Even if you have not lost anyone close to you, remember we are all mourning, in our own way, inwardly or outwardly, the loss of normalcy, the world we thought we knew and the control we thought we had over our lives. Because loss is not just about the loss of a significant other, it could also be the loss of your job, of a hoped for promotion, or it could be a physical loss like losing a limb or suddenly developing a health condition that changes how you now have to live your life. And right now, in this new world we are navigating, there may be a sense of loss of what we hoped for, our dreams and aspirations and how we thought the future would be.

If you have lost a loved one

The physical and emotional comfort we need from family and friends during the grieving process is important in helping us cope with the loss. But right now, the need for social isolation and keeping a physical distance is driving a wedge through those moments of emotional and physical connection.

Coping with grief and sorrow alone is one of the hardest, most challenging parts of the grieving process.

Whilst everyone goes through their own individual grief journey in their own time, there are some responses and reactions that are common and some key stages that people often pass through. The model below was written by Elizabeth Kubler - Ross and David Kessler and is just one of many frameworks that can help us to understand the grieving process.

The key points to remember are:

- Our grief is as individual as we are. We must do it our way, not in the way others expect us to.
- Not everyone will go through all the stages, and they are not sequential, so you may go back and forth between these feelings and that is normal.
- Give yourself the space and time to work through these emotions at your own pace. I reiterate again your own pace because others' may want you to 'move on' much quicker than you want to or can. This is your grief and you do it your way in your own time.
- It is not good to deny feelings of grief as they are likely to emerge in physical/bodily symptoms instead.

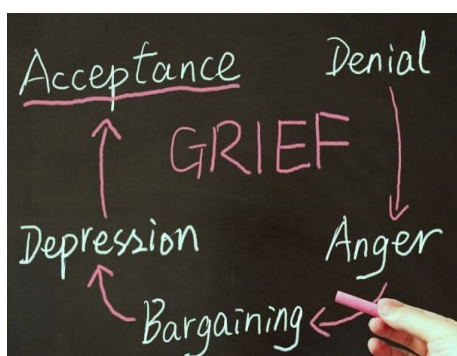


The 5 Stages

Denial

When we are in denial, which is usually but not always the first stage of the grieving process, we may be feeling shocked and numb. We can't believe what has happened. The denial gives us moments away from our pain, it is our nervous systems' way of coping. Denial helps us pace and cope with our feelings of grief. It is nature's way of letting in only as much as we can handle at that time. You may have some days of feeling such raw emotion you can't cope and others where you feel nothing. This is normal if very confusing and unsettling.

Anger



This can be about being angry at yourself that you didn't see it coming, or that maybe you didn't do enough. It may be anger at the medical profession for not saving your loved one, or you're angry at your loved one for leaving you. Anger does not have to be logical, valid or about just one thing. But please remember that anger is a necessary stage of the grieving process and you need to allow your anger to surface. Bottling it up in the long run will not be good for you. It's not the anger that is the problem, rather how you deal with it that is important. Because underneath the anger is pain. And remember your anger often shows the intensity of your love.

Bargaining

The bargaining stage is where we bargain with ourselves or a higher power so you can go back to the life you had before.



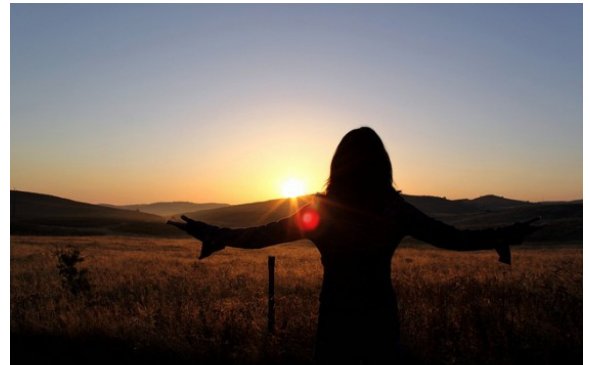
You pray or make promises to yourself or to a higher power in return for the painful situation not to occur or for things to go back to how they were before the loss, even though deep down in your soul you know things will never be the same again. Bargaining can often be an escape from the pain we are feeling, or the lack of control we have over the situation.

Depression

As grief enters our being on a deeper level, and we have to acknowledge the loss and that our life is never going to be the same again, we can often enter into a stage of depression. We feel empty, life seems pointless, doing everyday activities just feels like too much, and you don't care about anything. This depression is not a sign of mental illness, on the contrary it's a natural response to our loss and part of the grieving process. To not experience depression after a significant loss would be unusual, even unhealthy. This feeling of depression due to grief is usually transitory and is nature's way of keeping us protected, by shutting down our nervous system so we have time to adapt to a situation that we feel we cannot cope with. Allowing your sadness to be with you, like a 'visitor' who pops in but then leaves when they have been acknowledged will help you to move on. And over time this 'visitor' will be with you less and less.

Acceptance

This stage is about coming to terms with the reality that our loved one is gone, and that our life will never be the same again. It is the acceptance of this fact, even though it causes upset and pain. It's about learning to live with the reality of the situation. Acceptance is about having one good day along with a few bad days. It's about starting to reconnect with the world, reaching out to others we may not have been in contact with. It's about learning to live in the world again in a more integrated way.



What may help whilst you grieve

Acknowledge Your Feelings & Pain

Whatever you feel right now is valid and normal. And it is normal for your feelings to fluctuate, from low mood to anger, calm to anxious, even sadness to happiness. Letting yourself move in and out of these states will be helpful to your healing process. And expressing how you feel will help you make sense of all the different emotions you may be experiencing. Writing a journal or letter may help you put words to your feelings of loss.

Those around you will be grieving in their own way in their own time. There is no hierarchy of pain and suffering should not be ranked, so let each person grieve in the way they need to, including yourself.

You cannot get through your pain by diminishing it, you get through your pain by accepting it and figuring out what to do with it.

People Need People

People need people and never more than when we are grieving. It may be just one close relationship, or it may be many friends and family playing different roles. But your path to rebuilding your trust in life has to be paved with people who care about you. Even in the current climate you can stay connected in a variety of ways - a handwritten letter, phone calls, texts, video chat and social media can all give us the support and sense of belonging we need. Receiving care and support, and where possible giving it to others, in these difficult times, can be so comforting and reassuring and ultimately healing.



Sharing Your and Their Story

The power of being fully heard and acknowledged as we tell our story should never be underestimated. Even if it is just to one friend, try and find the words to express your feelings of grief and sorrow. In time, as your sadness lessens you will be able to also share happy memories of good times spent together.

Finding the external expression for the person you lost and the relationship you had through regular symbolic gestures and rituals is also important and has been shown to reduce negative emotions and increase positive ones.

Some ideas:

- Wearing something that connects you to them, like their watch or an article of their clothing such as a scarf.
- Visiting their grave and spending time talking to them and sharing your feelings
- Creating a memory box in which you place special objects such as their glasses, or cards, or pressed flowers; assembling a photograph album; or writing to them in a journal
- Cooking their favourite recipe
- Posting an image online you know they'd have loved

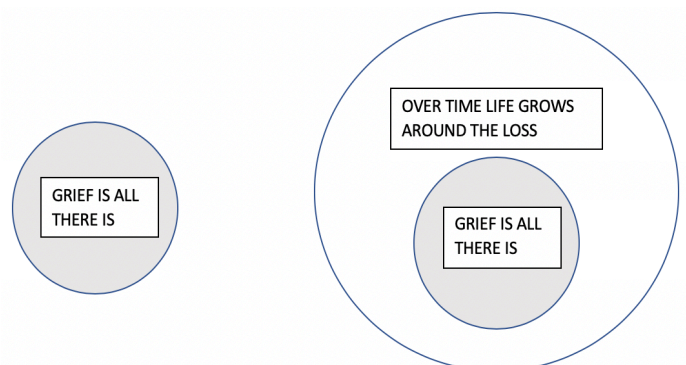
Self-Compassion & Kindness

Be gentle and patient with yourself! You are in transition and grieving is part of taking care of ourselves.

Even if right now you don't feel that time will heal, which it very often does, be reassured that what time does do is build a web of comfort around your feelings of loss. Life grows around your loss as shown in the diagram below.

There can be many expectations and pressures on the bereaved from family and friends, and sometimes our emotions only get to surface when the shock has worn off, or when we feel we can stop looking after others.

So please remember you need to do what is right for you at that moment in time. Afterwards, if you felt what you did or said was not 'right' or 'expected' you can say to yourself "I coped the best I could at the time with the feelings I had".



As Julia Samuels¹ writes so beautifully in her wonderful book *Grief Works*:

“Death steals the future we anticipated and hoped for, but it can’t take away the relationship we had. The connection to our loved one is maintained in our hearts through our memories, which are probably the most precious gift we will ever possess; they become part of us, our guides and our witnesses as we carry on with our lives”.

Messages of Condolence

Finally, some messages of condolence that were written to me from various friends and family when my dear mother died. I thought I would share them with you in the hope they bring you some comfort as they did me.

- We don’t move on from grief we move forward with it. May you move forward to a new normal that is filled with happy memories of good times spent together
- While at first you think the pain will never lift, there comes a time, when you are ready, when some of the happy memories start to break through and you remember what you had, not only what you have lost.
- We learn about our strengths as well as our limitations at times like this.
- How painful it can be to feel such loss and not know what to do with it. I hope you feel she is in your heart and her spirit is riding on your shoulders. Right now you maybe numb or filled with all the emotions of the universe, but take whatever time you need to grieve in your own way.

Quote of the week



*those we love
don't go away
they walk
beside us
every day
unseen, unheard
but always near
still loved,
still missed
and very dear.*

¹ Samuel, J., 2017. *Grief Works*. Penguin Life.



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