



## Grief and You

The death of a loved one is very difficult. It is important to realize that grief is a normal, natural and expected response to the loss of a significant person in your life.

Grief is a process of healing a broken heart. It is painful. Many people are tempted to run away from grief, but it is a necessary process. It takes great courage to cope with loss and begin to embrace life again.

Grief has many ups and downs. It lasts much longer than our society recognizes and no two people experience grief in the same way. There is no “right or wrong” way to grieve. There is only *your* way.

### Introduction to Grief

Grief affects us totally - physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually. Most people who suffer a loss experience one or more of the following:

- feel tightness in the throat or heaviness in the chest;
- have an empty feeling in their stomach and lose their appetite;
- feel guilty at times, angry at others;
- feel restless and look for activity, but find it difficult to concentrate;
- feel as though the loss isn't real, that it didn't really happen;
- sense the loved ones presence, like finding themselves expecting the person to walk through the door at the usual time, hearing their voice, or seeing their face;
- wander aimlessly, forget, or don't finish things they've started to do around the house;
- have difficulty sleeping and dream of their loved one frequently;
- assume mannerisms or traits of their loved one;
- experience an intense preoccupation with the life of the deceased;
- feel guilty or angry over things that happened or didn't happen in the relationship with the deceased;

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- feel intensely angry at the loved one for leaving them;
- feel as though they need to take care of other people who seem uncomfortable around them by politely not talking about their feelings of loss;
- need to tell and retell and remember things about the loved one and the experience of their death;
- feel their mood changes over the slightest things;
- cry at unexpected times.

These are all natural and normal grief responses. It is our unconscious attempt to “bring back” our loved one and to ultimately survive our loss.

## **The Facts of Grief**

by Paula Brindley, Coordinator of Palliative Care Services, Edmonton Palliative Care Program

- We have many losses in our lives.
- We are all vulnerable to the profound feelings that accompany loss...whether that be our own impending death or loss of health; the death or loss of health of someone we love; the loss of relationships, of functions, of dreams; the loss of possessions or pets.
- There are no degrees of severity of loss.
- Loss can result in a wide range of emotional, physical, intellectual, social, familial, economic, and spiritual disruptions.
- When we lose something or someone, we usually grieve.
- It is normal to grieve.
- Grief is a highly personal response to loss.
- Grief is a natural reaction to loss.
- Bereavement is a state of deprivation following the loss of something held to be significant, whether positive or negative.
- Grief work is the process in which people engage to resolve the disruptions caused by bereavement.
- Grief has stages.
- Grief has tasks.
- Grief work is ongoing and has to be worked at.

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- Grief has feelings, thoughts, behaviours, spiritual aspects and physiological symptoms which are all associated with it.
- Grief is never finished, but it does get easier.
- Most people can cope with grief with their own, already existing patterns of coping and resources; they may need a little help however, especially support and acceptance.
- It can be a positive experience to grieve.
- In order to gain, we lose.
- In order to grow, we have to acknowledge loss.
- In acknowledging loss, we feel pain.
- Through the pain, we grow; we develop a sense of meaning.
- We are who we are by the experiences we survive.
- How we survive is our choice.
- No one can do our grieving for us, or for someone else.
- We usually grieve in the same way that we live.
- Bereavement care is available in the form of treatment, support and care to those who are grieving a recent significant loss. Those who support grieving people need support too.

*If you feel what is inside you, it will set you free.*

*If you hold onto what is inside you, it will destroy you.*

- Zen proverb

## **Cycle of Grief**

The grief process takes longer than most people think. It is said that it may take eighteen months to two years (or longer) to have healed to a place where you feel ready to invest fully into the future, to experience the “special” days in one calendar year.

Be gentle with yourself. Give yourself permission to take as much time as you need to heal.

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The **Cycle of Grief** includes:

1. **SHOCK** - When someone we love dies, we go into a mild shock, numbed by the news that we do not want to believe.
2. **CRYING** - When we begin to see how dreadful this loss is to us, we hurt inside and crying helps us to get our pain out.
3. **DEEP SUFFERING** - This is the time when people in grief need help the most. People feel very much alone, very depressed, and in such great despair that there seems to be no help for them.
4. **SICKNESS** - People can often get so sick they have to go to bed with illness or to the hospital.
5. **WORRIED ABOUT GOING CRAZY** - One of the normal and healthy experiences occurs when a person feels that he/she is “going crazy”; he/she has visions and dreams about the person who died.
6. **GUILT** - In grief, a person begins to feel guilty about so many things he/she did or said or did not do or say. He/she is afraid that God, other people, and the person who has died will not forgive him/her.
7. **ANGER** - Tremendous waves of anger well up in a grieving person - at doctors, nurses at God, at the person who has died, and at others. Anger is one of the first good signs that a person is beginning to feel better and is coming out of mourning.
8. **RESTLESSNESS** - A person may find it very hard to go back and do things he/she did before the person died, either keeping too busy or unable to settle down to do what he/she would like to do.
9. **HOPE** - A person now has a sense of a new and stronger beginning.
10. **SAFE** - The person in grief after two years has now begun to become a new and different person and has come out of the period of mourning.

## **Signs of Healing**

There are many signs of healing, however, it is normal and common for someone going through the grief process to experience set backs at any point. Daily living and memories can trigger pain and sadness without a moment's notice. During these setbacks, people coping with loss need acceptance and support, not judgment. Some signs of healing are:

- ability to enjoy time alone;
- looking forward to holidays;
- enjoyment of a joke;
- eating, sleeping and exercise patterns return to “normal”;
- a renewed sense of energy and purpose;

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- ability to concentrate on a book or favourite TV program;
- ability to remember both good and bad times;
- ability to drive somewhere alone or sit through a religious service without crying;
- establishing new and healthy relationships;
- organizing and planning for the future;
- looking forward to getting up in the morning;
- reinvesting the energy once spent on the deceased in other projects;
- enjoying life's pleasant experiences;
- no longer needing daily or weekly trips to the cemetery;
- accepting things as they are instead of trying to return to how they were;
- treating own grief "attacks" with patience;
- able to discover personal growth from the grief process.

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