

Loss and grief

Loss is a natural, if very painful, part of the process of living. Everyone experiences it. Some losses are more painful than others: loss through the death of a loved one, loss through divorce, loss of a job, loss of friends because of a move or retirement. Loss brings with it another natural and very human response — grief. Like resting when we are tired or drinking when we are thirsty, grieving is a normal, necessary and natural part of staying healthy. It's nature's way of healing an emotional wound.

Grieving can be difficult and emotionally exhausting. Because of this, you may feel that it is best to put your loss behind you as quickly as possible, to be strong and to get on with your life. But suppressing grief doesn't make you stronger. On the contrary, unresolved grief can lead to serious emotional or physical problems. If left unresolved, grief can lead to depression, anxiety, sickness, alcohol or other drug use, or even suicide.

The process of grieving

Grieving takes place over time, often more time than we might think. Experts say that the process of grieving can last a year or longer, depending upon the individual and the circumstances of the loss. And each person experiences and expresses grief differently. The key to healing from a loss is to let yourself grieve for as long as it takes.

Grieving takes a person through a number of different stages. If you have experienced a severe loss, such as the death of a loved one, you may experience the following stages:

- **Shock.** You may experience disbelief or

denial or feel numb. It may seem as if the world has fallen apart.

- **Food of emotions.** Crying, screaming and other emotional releases are normal. Cry as much and as often as you feel the urge. Crying is a natural healer and stress reducer that should not be held back.

- **Physical symptoms.** You may experience insomnia or sleep more than usual; or you may experience discomfort, fatigue, loss of appetite or other changes in your body.

- **Depression.** You may feel that you will never recover, never be happy again. You may panic thinking about life without your loved one. But you *will* recover with time. If you allow yourself to grieve, you will eventually regain your happiness.

- **Guilt.** Even if there is no factual reason for it, feeling guilty is normal. You may go through "if only" feelings (i.e., "If only I had been there when it happened"). Openly sharing these feelings with others is very helpful in resolving guilt. Forgive yourself.

- **Anger.** It's not uncommon to be angry — at the loved one for leaving or at life for being unfair. Again, this is normal, and the best way to work through it is to share these feelings with someone. If you express your anger, it will eventually subside, and you may find a renewed faith that you thought was lost.

- **Idealization and realization.** At first you may feel that the past was perfect and the future will never be quite as good. This is normal. As time goes on and you work through your grief, you'll find that the past was good and bad at times and that the future may not be so bleak.

- **Detachment.** As you begin to see the past as the past, you can develop new routines in your life.

- **Continuing your life.** Over time, if the normal stages of grieving have not been blocked or inhibited, you will adjust to the loss, recognize it and go on with life.

These stages ebb and flow. Some stages may take longer than others to work through, or something you thought was resolved may reappear. Be easy on yourself, give yourself time and stay as active as you can — exercise, take a vacation, stay in contact with the world outside. Avoid making major decisions, such as selling your home or changing jobs, for at least a year.

Avoid using alcohol and other drugs to manage your feelings. Their use can lead to serious health problems and may actually delay or block the healing process of grieving. Medications should be monitored carefully and used only under the supervision of a physician.

Children and grief

Grieving is a very difficult and painful process for children. And often, in the emotional turmoil surrounding a loss, a child's grief may be overlooked. Children need the love, attention, support and understanding of adults to help them in their grief. It helps you and the children to share your feelings, tears and memories with them.

Keep in mind that a child, especially a very young child, may have a limited understanding of death and its permanence. When you explain a death, explain it in simple, real terms. Don't try to soften it with phrases like "Daddy's gone away" or "God took grandma to

be with Him." This may confuse the child and may cause unrealistic views or feelings (Why did Daddy go away and not say goodbye? When is he coming back?). Very young children may need to be told again and again that a loved one has died and will not return. Explain this patiently as often as you must.

You may not know what to say to a child, and explaining a loss while coping with your own grief can be extremely difficult. Try to be as open and honest as possible and try to share as much as you can with the child. Silence can make children feel isolated and may convey the message that they should limit their grieving. Giving extra hugs and holding hands go a long way toward easing a child's pain.

Children, some as old as 11 or 12, may feel responsible for the death — feel that they caused it by "being bad" or by doing something wrong. Reassure the child that he or she was in no way responsible for the death.

Like adults, children adjust to loss in phases. Give them all the time they need. They may experience anxiety, be unresponsive at times or distracted at school for a while. This is normal. You can help the child by maintaining daily routines and familiar activities. Also, encourage the child, even during grieving, to do the things they enjoy, to continue to enjoy life.

Remember that the most important factor in how well a child adjusts to a loss is the support he or she receives from loved ones.

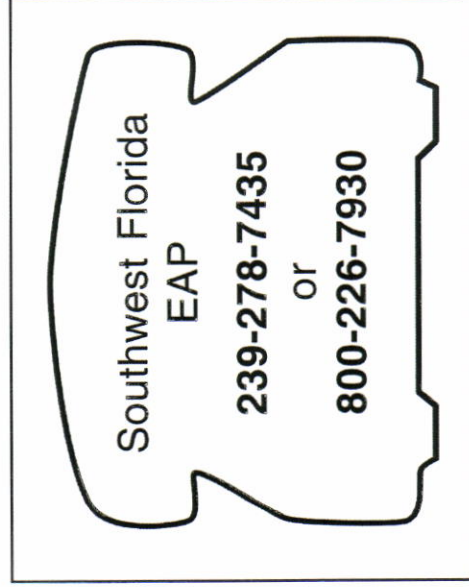
Getting help

Though most people — children and adults — do not suffer lasting effects from a loss, some may benefit from the assistance of a professional counselor experienced in working

with grieving and loss. Some mental health facilities, churches and schools offer support groups so that those who have suffered a loss can share their feelings and experiences under the guidance of a counselor. Individual counseling also may be beneficial.

Help is available

Just talking about your problems sometimes leads to new solutions. If you or someone you know needs information, guidance or help, contact the resource listed below or look online for local professionals who can help.



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