



The Grieving Process

Next Steps

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*Hospice of Southern Illinois is your
community not-for-profit hospice.*

*There comes a time...
to ask how hospice can help.*

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Shortly after the death of a loved one, there is the hustle and bustle of family and friends. After the funeral, when friends and family have gone back to their daily routines, suddenly you are alone and life may seem to have lost its meaning.

At times you may feel as if you are losing your mind. You may “see” your deceased loved one, or “hear” him or her call your name. You may cry at nothing and laugh at anything. You may want to stay away from others. You may love and hate the one who has died.

You may develop pains and experience a general feeling of weakness. You may have feelings of suffocation. You may feel a lot of self-pity. You may even wish you were the one that had died.

These things, and more, are the “threads of separation - the work of saying goodbye to your loved one.”

No one is immune to death. It is as certain as the rain and the separation is as final as yesterday. Although this may make you feel anxious and insecure about the future, life will still go on and death can give new meaning to life.

This booklet is designed to further explain grief and offer insight into what you can do to understand your grief. Each explanation and suggestion is a generalization that you may, or may not experience.

Your grief is as unique to you, as you are a unique individual. Through this booklet, we hope to also encourage you to express your grief in your own special way.

What is Grief?

Grief is a unique and natural response to loss. Grief is as normal as playing, laughing, crying, and sleeping. It can be one way of saying, “I love you.” Or it can be a way of saying, “I’m sorry for all of the things I didn’t say and do.”

We experience loss as a normal part of our lives. Life experiences such as moving, going away to school or joining the military all contain some form of loss. Loss is also a part of death. We call our response to loss “grieving.” Grief is the natural response to the loss of that which is meaningful to us. It is a deep, human emotion.

All people who experience the loss of someone near to them must sooner or later go through a grieving process. Besides being an emotional response, grief also can be expressed physically, intellectually, socially and spiritually.

When death comes to someone you love, even though you may have expected it, you may be totally shocked. Life may seem unfair and meaningless. Numbness or a lack of emotions is not uncommon. At other times, self-pity, anger, anxiety, and guilt may overwhelm you. As time goes on, you find meaning for your life— new meaning in love for others, your job, your family, your friends.

Everyone’s response to grief is very different. Some process their grief emotionally and others physically. There are steps you can take which will empower you to work through the grief process. Grieving is normal and necessary to the healing process. Your loved one is gone, but you are still here. Life is not over for you. You still have a future.

Physical Responses to Loss

1. Tightness in the throat/heaviness in the chest
2. An empty feeling in the stomach/loss of appetite
3. Sensing your loved one's presence, as in expecting the person to walk in the door at the usual time
4. Wandering aimlessly, forgetting and neglecting to finish things you have started around the house
5. Having difficulty sleeping/dreaming of loved one frequently
6. Crying at unexpected times
7. Having a lack of response to anything--“checking out”/ “zoning out”

What to Do:

- **Eat well.** Grief stresses the body. You need good nourishment now more than ever, so make sure you are eating a healthy diet. Vitamin and mineral supplements may help, if your doctor approves them. Drinking supplemental drinks (ex: Boost, etc.) may help during times when your appetite is poor.
- **Exercise regularly.** Exercise “lightens the load” through biochemical changes. It also helps you to sleep better. A long walk every day is ideal for many people.
- **Nurture yourself.** Each day, try to do something good for yourself. Think of what you might do for someone else if they were in your shoes and then do that favor for yourself.
- **Give yourself some time.** With time, some of the physical responses to grief will diminish or disappear. Change doesn't occur overnight.
- **See your physician.** Although grief is not an illness, your body may be significantly drained of its energy making you more susceptible to illnesses. It is a good idea to have a regular check-up with your doctor.

Emotional Responses to Loss

1. Feeling shock and numbness, as though functioning on “auto-pilot”
2. Feeling great sadness beyond expression
3. Feeling guilty at times and angry at others
4. Feeling guilty/angry over things that happened/didn't happen in the relationship with the deceased
5. Feeling intensely angry at the loved one for leaving
6. Feeling mood changes over the slightest things
7. Feeling as though feelings are abnormal and overwhelming

What to Do:

- **Accept the grief.** It hurts. Do not try to be brave. Take time to cry.
- **Talk about your loss.** Share your grief with someone you trust. If your supports are limited, bereavement counselors are available to help.
- **Deal with guilt, real or imagined.** You did the best you could at the time. If you made mistakes, accept the fact that you, like everyone else, are not perfect.
- **DON'T feel bad if you “don't feel bad.”** Due to the length of your loved one's illness, you may have already grieved your loss along the way, while your loved one was declining.
- **Record your feelings in a journal.** Writing helps you get your feelings out. It also shows your progress.
- **Share your feelings.** You will find that others may share similar feelings as you.
- **Ask for help.** Recognize the signs for when it may be time to seek professional help (See page 10-11).

Social Responses to Loss

1. Discouraging visitors and wanting to be alone
2. Needing to tell and retell stories/memories about the loved one and the experience of his/her death
3. Feeling isolated and alone, like no one understands
4. Feeling a need to take care of other people who seem uncomfortable around you by politely not talking about your loss
5. Experiencing a lack of enjoyment; what used to be routine, fun activities are now awkward and burdensome
6. Feeling uncomfortable (like a “fifth wheel”) when out with friends
7. Noticing that friends may avoid you and your situation because they don’t know what to say or do

What to Do:

- **Memorialize and ritualize your grief.** Making memories helps us work through the pain. Do something special to remember your loved one.
- **Join a group of others who are feeling sorrow.** Your circle of friends may change. Even if it does not, you will need new friends who can understand your experience.
- **Associate with old friends also.** Some will be uneasy, but they will get over it. If and when you can, talk and act naturally, without avoiding the subject of your loss.
- **Take the initiative.** Make the attempt to try something new, or do something you used to do before your loved one died. Don’t be afraid to accept the invitation of a friend or invite people to spend time with you.

Intellectual Responses to Loss

1. Feeling restless and looking for activity, but finding it difficult to concentrate
2. Feeling as though the loss isn't real, that it didn't really happen
3. Experiencing an intense pre-occupation with the life of the deceased
4. Feeling as though thoughts are abnormal and overwhelming

What to Do:

- Keep busy. Do work that has a purpose. Use your mind. With that said, don't get so caught up in staying busy, that you are using it as a way to avoid feeling the grief. ***You will experience burnout if you don't stop to grieve.***
- Postpone major decisions. Wait, before deciding whether or not to sell your house or to change jobs.
- Record your thoughts in a journal. Writing helps you get your thoughts out. It also shows your progress.
- Read this booklet and seek other resources about grief. Growing in knowledge about grief helps to understand thoughts and feelings.
- Acknowledge your loss. Make adjustments to your new environment without your loved one. Make your space your own and be comfortable with it.

Spiritual Responses to Loss

1. “Negative” Responses:

- Experiencing anger at God for allowing this to happen
- Feeling a loss of hope and faith

2. “Positive” Responses:

- Drawing closer to your spirituality as a source of strength and hope
- Finding a new meaning for your life that comes from experiencing your loss

What to Do:

- First, consider consulting a person of faith.
- Take advantage of a religious affiliation, if you have one. If you have been inactive, this might be the time to become involved again. For some people, grief opens the door to faith. After a time, you might not be as angry with God as you once were.
- Meditate and/or pray. Times of reflection help you to review the past and can help you to find peace. These times also can be used as a relaxation tool to relieve stress.
- Turn your grief into creative energy. Find a way to help others—sharing someone else’s load may lighten your own. Write something as a tribute to your loved one.
- Read scripture or quotes. Write your favorites down and post them where they are always visible to you. Posting these notes can encourage and strengthen you. Memorizing special phrases can be daily reminders of love and joy.

Children and Grief

“Remember, any child old enough to love is old enough to mourn... With our love and attention, they will learn to understand their loss and grow to be emotionally healthy children, adolescents and adults.” -Dr. Alan Wolfelt (Wolfelt, 2015, para. 31)

Children also grieve. Their grief is very similar to adults. One of the few differences is that they grieve according to their developmental stage.

This does not mean that children at certain ages cannot understand death and loss. All children can understand loss. Toddlers understand loss when a toy is taken from them, and teenagers understand loss when they are grounded. The difference with children is their ability to associate meaning to a death.

A child may have had a pet that died and “went to heaven.” The death of a loved one may be associated in the same way. Association must be carefully considered. One, such as the loved one “went to sleep,” may scare the child into not wanting to go to sleep rather than comfort them.

Children need to see adults grieve. Children consistently learn by example. If the adults in their lives act “brave” around them, and don’t express their grief, children will do the same. By keeping grief hidden, they will believe that there is something wrong with their real feelings. Their intense feelings of loss are still there, but they won’t feel they have the freedom to express them.

Adults, however, should not burden children with the responsibility of consoling them during the adult’s time of grief. This may cause a child to feel that they need to be brave, deny their grief, and support their parent or significant adult.

Children are resilient. Do not be afraid to approach a child and invite him/her to be a part of the rituals the family has for coping with grief. Just like adults, children can find comfort in mementos of their loved one, and they can release their feelings through talking, writing, and drawing.

- **Honestly share information** about the death with children, and give them opportunities to ask the tough questions.
- **Be simple, straightforward and repetitious** in explanations. Children are not trying to be annoying when asking tough questions multiple times. They simply need a little more time and understanding to figure out death.
- **Allow children the choice** of how much they would like to be involved in the family gatherings, decision-making and rituals.
- **Be supportive and reassuring** of their feelings and thoughts related to the death. Reassure them of their future, and about being taken care of.
- **Encourage children to be children.** Children may try to take on more adult responsibilities than necessary because they feel obligated to do so.
- **Don't forget those hugs.** Physical contact is an important reminder of love and gives children the sense of still being included.
- **Children need their usual routines and discipline.** Readjusting to the loss of a loved one is difficult, but is made simpler with as few changes as possible. This reassures children of continued love and stability. For example, they may choose to go to school where their “normal” and their support system is.
- **Additional grief resources for children** are available from the Hospice of Southern Illinois' Bereavement Counselors.

Complicated Grief

“My life was suddenly divided into BEFORE and AFTER, and there was no going back to BEFORE. But then I realized I had a choice to live the AFTER. I had to decide.”

-Brenda Neal (Wunnenburg, 2009, Devotional 55)

There are some people whose grief is so intense it never goes away or diminishes. After a significant period of time of experiencing this intense grief it may be time to seek professional help. Do not allow crippling grief to continue. There comes a time to stop crying and to live again. Sometimes just a few sessions with a trained counselor will help.

Signs and Signals of Complicated Grief

All of these warning signs contain elements of healthy grief reactions. They can be considered “complicated” based on their level of intensity, the amount of elapsed time since the loss, and the degree to which the behavior represents a threat to health, life, functioning or goal attainment.

- **Showing a minimal or total lack of emotional expression regarding the loss.** Grieving is absent, delayed or inhibited. Behaviors may be “wooden” and/or formal.
- **Having a prolonged inability to recognize that the loss has happened.** This includes “living in the past,” living as if the loss had not occurred, or having an extreme attachment to a specific object. This object is then used to replace or represent the deceased so that the loss can be denied and the loved one can be “kept alive.”
- **Expressing extreme reactions of grief, usually anger or guilt, that persist over time.** These outward or inward protests divert or distort grief so that no real mourning or healing occurs.
- **Developing a gradual or significant change in health status.** This includes increased complaints or symptoms of poor or declining health, development of psychosomatic illness and in some cases, experiencing the same symptoms that the deceased person had before they died.

- **Prolonged depression with tension, agitation, insomnia and feelings of worthlessness and self-blame.** A lowered energy level and withdrawal from social and other activities usually accompany this.
- **Over-activity without a sense of loss.** Being busy all of the time without taking the time to feel or think through grief is an act of denial. This can lead to an eventual sense of burnout and can delay healing from the loss.

Helping Yourself

Seeking and accepting support. You need acceptance and caring throughout your period of grief. If you lack support, make finding it your first priority. Start with family, friends or clergy . . . or call Hospice of Southern Illinois.

- **Accepting your grief.** Time, by itself, does not heal grief. To work through it, you must accept and deal with it. Remember it is a natural healing process.
- **Finding models.** You may need evidence that survival and growth are possible. Look for someone who can give you this hope. Books and support groups may be good places to begin.
- **Learning about grief.** Many people who have learned about grief have declared . . . “I found out I’m not crazy, I’m grieving.” Understanding grief can make it less fearful and more predictable.
- **Expressing your grief.** Without expression, grief can leave you frozen and stoic. Find someone to listen to your story... again and again. You also may want to express it privately through art, poetry or writing in a journal.
- **Accepting your feelings.** Grief brings about many feelings . . . some very intense. Accepting them will help you learn about yourself and the meaning of your loss. Locking them up inside of you will lead to losing parts of yourself.

- **Not rushing yourself. Grief takes energy.** You may tire easily. A slower pace alternated with periods of diversion, and mild exercise, will maximize healing. Healing also will be maximized with good nutrition.
- **Involving yourself in meaningful work or activities.** Meaningful tasks can help you maintain direction, control and purpose and occupy your mind.
- **Trusting your own sense of timing.** You will know when it is time to sort through personal belongings, give mementos to family and friends, and begin moving in new directions.
- **Not being afraid to have fun.** Laughter is good medicine. Allowing yourself opportunities for diversion and freshness is key. Surrounding yourself with children and pets can provide a great deal of healing.
- **Maintaining hope that things will get better.** Faith is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to go on when fear is present. There is a time to take the next steps. Healing will come, with time.

Hospice of Southern Illinois, Inc.

The employees of Hospice of Southern Illinois, Inc. are available to help you with your grief. For 13 months following your loved one's death, your family will receive mailings and/or phone calls to inquire about your progress. You can call us anytime you may need to.

*If at any time you feel the need to talk with someone about your loss, please call **1-800-233-1708**. Employees of Hospice of Southern Illinois, Inc. can provide support, resources and education on grief and the grief process.*

The mission of Hospice of Southern Illinois, Inc. is to enhance the quality of life for individuals and their loved ones touched by a terminal illness.

*This booklet was compiled by the employees of
Hospice of Southern Illinois*

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Other Resources for Caregivers on the Web Are:

www.caringbridge.org

Online Community for Friends and Family Together
During Health Journeys

www.aarp.org/griefandloss

AARP – American Association of Retired Persons

www.griefnet.org

Internet Community of People Dealing with Grief, Death, and Major Loss

www.griefshare.org

Find Help and Healing for the Hurt of Losing a Loved One

www.dougy.org

The Dougy Center for Grieving Children and Families

www.grief.com

Because Love Never Dies



Your Community Not-For-Profit Hospice

Our mission is to enhance the quality of life for individuals and their loved ones touched by a terminal illness.



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