

GUIDANCE ON UNDERSTANDING AND COPING WITH GRIEF

Grief is the most painful of all human experiences and is a natural reaction to loss. It is the process, which allows people to come to terms with the loss and resulting change in their lives. Loss can take many forms, from the obvious death of a partner, relative or friend, to divorce or the loss of a job. The grieving process takes many forms and is an intensely personal emotion. It can take varying lengths of time depending on the significance of the loss, even lasting for several years.

Understanding Grief

Grief is a very personal and individual experience and is comprised not of just one feeling, but of many. However, though we may experience different feelings at different times, grief usually follows a general, recognisable pattern.

Disbelief

After a loss such as bereavement the initial response is one of numbness and disbelief. The body releases chemicals when facing severe stress, such as adrenaline to boost thinking, alertness and coping with pain. The early days play a valuable part in helping to bring the bereaved person to terms with the death. Seeing the body and organising the funeral all help to bring home the reality of the situation and the very aspect of being busy with the planning and formalities surrounding a death can help some people. Some people may continue to carry out their normal routine and daily activities but feel completely numb and not part of the real world.

Anger and Guilt

Once the numbness disappears it may be replaced by anger. Anger is strongly associated with grief and can come in many forms. It may be directed at figures of authority such as doctors or surgeons or may be self-directed as self-guilt. It is common to question the circumstances of the death and ask questions about how it could have been prevented, or what someone should have done or should not have done. Anger can even be directed at the deceased person, particularly in the case of suicide. There may also be a period of agitation with intense yearning for the dead person and a sense of almost 'searching' for them. Guilt is another common feeling, often linked to thoughts of things that have or haven't been said or done.

Depression

After the intense emotions outlined above, a feeling of depression usually sets in and the bereaved person may seem withdrawn and silent. Three to four months after the death can be a particularly hard time, as this is when the reality of the death really sinks in and yet it can be a time when family and friends begin to pick up their own lives and start to expect the bereaved person to get on with their own life. The real sense of loss and the long-term gap in the life of the bereaved. It may also be a very lonely time, when the bereaved person feels that no one else understands him or her and what they are going through and that their grief will never go away. Conflicts can arise with for example the different ways people grieve. One parent of a child who has died may seem to be coping and consequently not caring by the other parent who is still in deep trauma. Depression can last longer after a sudden death than a natural death, particularly when the body has not been recovered or is unrecognisable. Visiting the site of the death can sometimes ease grief but again this is a very personal decision.

Adjustment and Recovery

The basic human instinct of survival is very strong and the grieving process is not only a natural reaction to the death of loved ones but is critical in allowing us to carry on with life. Gradually most people begin to cope on a day-to-day basis and try to fill some of the gaps and adjust to the change in their lives. It is still very important to provide as much support as possible as well as being there to listen.

It is good advice not to take any major decisions affecting the bereaved person's life until at least a year after the bereavement. Often people jump into decisions such as moving house or area at a time when they are particularly vulnerable and emotional. A home, which holds many memories, may seem painful initially but such associations could be seen as comforting later on.

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