

Some Facts Psychologists Know About...

GRIEF

What Is Grief?

Grief is a natural emotional reaction to a significant loss or expected loss. It is an essential component of the eventual emotional process of recovery from loss. Grief usually occurs in response to many different types of loss, including:

- the death of a loved one
- the end or breakup of a significant relationship
- a loved one experiencing a chronic or terminal illness
- the loss of an important life factor, such as financial security or a job you like
- the death of a pet
- a significant negative change in health or physical functioning
- placing a child for adoption
- infertility

Grief vs. Mourning

Grief is the internal experience of loss; the thoughts and feelings about a loss that you experience within yourself.

Mourning is the outward expression of grief. Crying, talking about the person who died, or celebrating memories and anniversary dates are all ways of mourning.

At times, we must grieve alone, but mourning is also necessary so that you are not alone.

When helping people who grieve, it is important that you do **NOT**...

- Withdraw from the survivor, removing your support.
- Suggest positive outcomes from the loss.
- Mention that the death could have been prevented in some way (e.g., If only...).
- Rationalize positive aspects of the death.
- Compare the survivor's grief reaction to other people you know.
- Dwell on your own grief to show your sorrow.
- Become frightened by intense emotions and then retreat from the situation.
- Try to talk them out of their feelings.
- Force physical gestures (*i.e., hug, holding hands, etc.*). If unsure, it can be helpful to extend a hand to touch them and if they appear uncomfortable it is best to retreat and offer silent support without touch.
- Take rejection by the survivor as a personal attack on you or your relationship with the survivor.

Myths about the grief process

Myth: *The experience of grief and mourning proceed in predictable and orderly stages, such as denial, anger, guilt etc.*

This stages-of-grief idea is appealing, but inaccurate. It emerged from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' groundbreaking book, *On Death and Dying*. However, Dr. Kubler-Ross did not intend for these emotions to be interpreted as stages or steps, but rather to help people understand that denial, anger, guilt, and sadness are common, normal and expected reactions. If you are experiencing anger, it doesn't mean that you are "less evolved" than someone feeling guilt. Many people do not fully experience all of these feelings. Who is to say what is a "normal" feeling for every person when you have lost someone you loved? Find people who accept you and your grief, and who allow you to be where you happen to be in the grieving process.

"BE STRONG"

Myth: *After losing someone you love, your goal should be to "be strong", and "get over" your grief as soon as possible. Crying means that you are "falling apart", and that is not what anyone wants.*

Crying is nature's way of releasing tension, and it lets others know that you need to be comforted. When stress is high, crying even discharges accumulating stress toxins within our tears.

Society often encourages people to quickly move away from grief. Unfortunately, refusing to cry, suffering in silence, and "being strong" are often viewed as admirable and desirable reactions to loss. Friends, family, and co-workers may encourage this stance because they don't want to talk about painful things, and there is nothing they can say or do to make it better. Many people have internalized the idea that grieving and mourning should be done quickly, quietly, and efficiently. The message from others seems to be, "Just get over it."

Find someone who accepts that no one can "make it better", and that your life surely will not be the same without the person (or pet) you loved. Find someone who can be present with you while you grieve so you do not have to bear it all alone. In time, you can learn to live with your grief while you learn to adjust to life without the presence of person (pet)

who has departed.

“How long should grief last?”

Myth: *It takes between three months and a year to “get over” losing someone you love.*

This question relates directly to our culture’s impatience with bereavement and the desire to move people away from the process of mourning as quickly as possible. We expect grieving people to “get back to normal” soon after the death or loss. All too often, we succumb to the myth that grief should be moved away from rather than moved toward, as something to be *overcome*, rather than experienced. Interestingly, when people are allowed to move toward their grief and to mourn openly, their grief becomes less intense and more manageable over time. Find someone who can allow you to mourn openly and freely and who will not label you as “weak” or “crazy”.

Confusing feelings...

You may experience a variety of feelings in your grieving process. *These may include but are not limited to:*

- ◆ **Shock, denial, numbness, disbelief:** These temporarily protect you from the full reality of the loss. They serve as a “psychological shock absorber” until you are more able to tolerate what you don’t want to believe.
- ◆ **Disorganization, confusion, searching, yearning:** Expect to forget things, to not be at your best. You may feel crazy, but you’re not. Other people may begin to look like the person you loved so much, because you want them to be there. Visual hallucinations such as this occur very frequently and are normal and expectable responses to grief. Dreams about the person are also very common.
- ◆ **Anxiety, panic, fear:** Your energy is drained, and you can easily feel overwhelmed by daily concerns. Take some time to relax or meditate every day.
- ◆ **Physiological changes:** You may experience trouble sleeping or low energy. You may need more rest than usual. Chronic existing health problems may become somewhat worse. Good self-care is important at this time; make sure you are getting enough to eat, and develop a regular eating and sleeping schedule. See your physician for a checkup.
- ◆ **Anger, rage, resentment, jealousy, blame, terror, explosive emotions:** Underneath them are usually feelings of pain, helplessness, and fear.
- ◆ **Guilt, remorse and regret:** You may feel guilt, remorse or regret about a variety of things: perhaps some things you did not say or do for your loved one; or, being angry with them before they departed. These are normal life events, and are usual parts of the imperfections of human relationships. Attempt to be more compassionate with yourself.

Some other types of guilt related to death that some grieving people often experience can include but are not limited to:

- ◆ **Survivor guilt** - the feeling that you should have died, instead of your loved one.
- ◆ **Relief guilt** – guilt about feeling relieved that your loved one died. Relief is natural and expectable, especially if a loved one suffered prior to death.
- ◆ **Joy guilt** – guilt about ever feeling happy again after a loved one has died. Joy is a natural and healthy experience in life. It is a sign that we are living life fully, which is something we must strive to return to following a significant loss.

When Grief Lasts Too Long ...Or Is Too Intense:

Grief is typically viewed as a normal, though intense, form of sadness. However, grief can sometimes cause extreme or prolonged problems as the sadness evolves into serious disorders of anxiety and depression. If this occurs, it is an indication that counseling or therapy is needed. These extreme reactions may include:

- feelings of panic and/or frenzy
- feeling overwhelmed and incapacitated by fear and grief
- emotional numbness that does not go away
- going to extremes to avoid thinking about the loss, such as abusing drugs or alcohol, or becoming totally immersed in work
- intense symptoms of depression which may include: chronic insomnia which may be interrupted by early morning wakening after falling asleep and difficulty falling back asleep; lack of appetite or overeating; lack of appetite for life such as relationships, sex, hobbies and recreation, or other things you used to find enjoyable; obsessive thoughts of death or thoughts of suicide.

How can therapy help?

Often, people find that friends and family are not able to provide the level or kinds of support needed in the grieving or mourning process. Friends and family may be overwhelmed with their own grief, or be unable to provide support because they themselves have fallen victim to societal myths. A therapist can help you understand your grieving process by providing information and support. He or she can provide a place for you to grieve fully and naturally, and help you move through your grief to find continued meaning in life.

