

# Coping with Death, Grief, and Loss

## What is Grief?

Grief occurs in response to the loss of someone or something. The loss may involve a loved one, a job, or possibly a role (student entering the workplace or employee entering retirement). Anyone can experience grief and loss. It can be sudden or expected; however, individuals are unique in how they experience this event. Grief, itself, is a normal and natural response to loss. There are a variety of ways that individuals respond to loss. Some are healthy coping mechanisms and some may hinder the grieving process. It is important to realize that acknowledging the grief promotes the healing process. Time and support facilitate the grieving process, allowing an opportunity to appropriately mourn this loss.

## Common Reactions to Loss:

Individuals experiencing grief from a loss may choose a variety of ways of expressing it. No two people will respond to the same loss in the same way. It is important to note that phases of grief exist; however, they do not depict a specific way to respond to loss. Rather, stages of grief reflect a variety of reactions that may surface as an individual makes sense of how this loss affects them. Experiencing and accepting all feelings remains an important part of the healing process.

- ***Denial, numbness, and shock***
  - This serves to protect the individual from experiencing the intensity of the loss.
  - Numbness is a normal reaction to an immediate loss and should not be confused with "lack of caring".
  - Denial and disbelief will diminish as the individual slowly acknowledges the impact of this loss and accompanying feelings.
- ***Bargaining***
  - At times, individuals may ruminate about what could have been done to prevent the loss.
  - Individuals can become preoccupied about ways that things could have been better, imagining all the things that will never be.
  - This reaction can provide insight into the impact of the loss; however, if not properly resolved, intense feelings of remorse or guilt may hinder the healing process.
- ***Depression***
  - After recognizing the true extent of the loss, some individuals may experience depressive symptoms.
  - Sleep and appetite disturbance, lack of energy and concentration, and crying spells are some typical symptoms.

- Feelings of loneliness, emptiness, isolation, and self-pity can also surface during this phase, contributing to this reactive depression.
- For many, this phase must be experienced in order to begin reorganizing one's life.
- **Anger**
  - This reaction usually occurs when an individual feels helpless and powerless.
  - Anger may result from feeling abandoned, occurring in cases of loss through death.
  - Feelings of resentment may occur toward one's higher power or toward life in general for the injustice of this loss.
  - After an individual acknowledges anger, guilt may surface due to expressing these negative feelings.
  - Again, these feelings are natural and should be honored to resolve the grief.
- **Acceptance**
  - Time allows the individual an opportunity to resolve the range of feelings that surface.
  - The grieving process supports the individual. That is, healing occurs when the loss becomes integrated into the individual's set of life experiences.
  - Individuals may return to some of the earlier feelings throughout one's lifetime.
  - There is no time limit to the grieving process. Each individual should define one's own healing process.
- ***Factors that may hinder the healing process:***
  - Avoidance or minimization of one's emotions.
  - Use of alcohol or drugs to self-medicate.
  - Use of work (overfunction at workplace) to avoid feelings.
- ***Guidelines that may help resolve grief***
  - Allow time to experience thoughts and feelings openly to self.
  - Acknowledge and accept all feelings, both positive and negative.
  - Use a journal to document the healing process.
  - Confide in a trusted individual; tell the story of the loss.

- Express feelings openly. Crying offers a release.
- Identify any unfinished business and try to come to a resolution.
- Bereavement groups provide an opportunity to share grief with others who have experienced similar loss.
- If the healing process becomes too overwhelming, seek professional help.

## **RECOMMENDED READING**

*Death, The Final Stage of Growth.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1975 Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth

*On Death and Dying.* New York: MacMillan, 1969 Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth

*When Bad Things Happen to Good People.* New York: Schocken Books, 1981 Kushner, H.S.