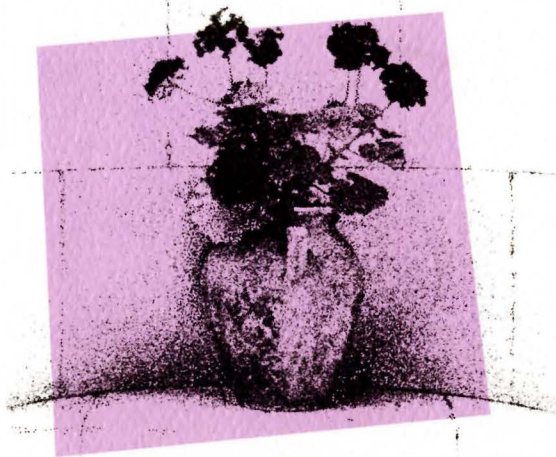

C O P I N G



W I T H

G R I E F





C O P I N G W I T H G R I E F

Grief over the death of a loved one is perhaps the most intense experience of loss we will have in our lifetime. It permeates the fabric of our lives, affecting our emotions, our bodies and our relationships with others.

No one can tell you how to grieve. Everyone's process is unique. However, there are some elements of bereavement that are more or less common to all who pass through it. Whether you are grieving, or you are the friend or co-worker of someone who has recently lost someone, understanding some of the common elements of the grieving process can help.



T H E G R I E V I N G P R O C E S S

Grieving is the slow work of redefining our world without the presence of someone we love. It takes time and patience to heal after such a loss. There is no formula to follow, nor schedule to adhere to. Grieving is the process of returning again and again to our images, feelings, and memories of our loved one until our loss is bearable.

Our initial response to overwhelming loss is often a sense of numbness. This natural reaction cushions the blow and allows us to attend to the responsibilities and concerns surrounding the death of a loved one. Most people also experience some form of denial as the heart and mind try to reconcile and

accommodate the loss. In time, you will find you can face your loss. Though part of you will always grieve, you will grow to accept the death of your loved one.

Grief is a mixture of raw feelings such as sorrow, anger, guilt, regret, emptiness and longing. Some emotions come and go in powerful waves that sweep us away. Others seem to grow roots and threaten to go on forever. The loss of a loved one will often bring up other unresolved losses in our lives. Our work during this time is not to explain or push away our grief, but to allow its full expression.

There are no right or wrong emotions. Each emotion has a part in our process of healing. We tend to bottle up difficult emotions. This can be especially true for those who feel they must be strong. This tends to create more stress and slows the grieving process. Unexpressed grief can lead to misplaced anger and unwarranted harshness toward others.

Like other aspects of grieving, feelings of anger, guilt and blame will come and go. They are a normal part of the grieving process. This is especially true if you were unable to be close to the person who has died. If any feeling, image or thought seems destructive or prolonged to you, you may want to consider talking with a professional or pastoral counselor.

Grief may also be experienced physically as pain or tightness in the chest, exhaustion, anxiety, difficulty sleeping, and loss of appetite. Difficult times will come again and again, but they will come less often, and not last as long. Nurturing yourself and accepting the support of others will help to safeguard your health.



How our loved one dies has a powerful effect on how we grieve. If someone we love dies from AIDS, we may experience a wide range of feelings. Many times, the person is young and in the midst of a productive life. For some, the onset of the disease may be sudden. For others, the progress of the disease may take many months, even years. Some people have lost many friends to AIDS in a short span of time. This can make us feel even more vulnerable, helpless and full of rage. Our grief may be mixed with guilt about our own survival and continued good health.

Sudden deaths, especially violent or accidental ones, can provoke greater shock, anxiety and distress. They can make us feel helpless and vulnerable, and may even arouse feelings of rage. Suicide often leads to a sense of guilt or failure among survivors.



A N T I C I P A T O R Y G R I E F

Sharing the dying process with a loved one spares them the isolation so characteristic of dying in our society. Everyone involved has an opportunity to be close, intensify their love, share their feelings, grieve together and come to some level of resolution before death occurs. Daily care of a dying person can be draining and stressful. It can also be one of the most profound experiences of love in a lifetime.



H E A L I N G O U R S E L V E S

Time alone will not heal grief. Consider the following suggestions:

◆ **ACCEPT YOUR GRIEF**

Accepting your grief is a first step toward resolving the loss of a loved one. Take time to be gentle toward yourself and accept your feelings.

◆ **COMMUNICATE OPENLY AND HONESTLY**

Share your grief. Share your memories and thoughts with those who can listen and understand your loss without passing judgement, or offering advice that seems inappropriate. Talk with people you trust. Attempting to protect others by not talking about your needs leaves them confused and uncertain as to how to respond. This is especially true when children are involved; they may blame themselves for your unhappiness.

◆ **TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF**

Be good to yourself with a nutritious diet and regular exercise. This may lighten any depression you may be experiencing and help you sleep better.

◆ **PRAYER, MEDITATION AND SOLITUDE**

This may be a time of deepening your understanding of life. Walking or spending time in quiet, natural settings can make us aware of the impermanent and cyclical nature of things. You may want to spend time in your chosen place of worship.

◆ SEEK SUPPORT

Bereaved people often join or form groups for friendship and mutual support. Allowing others to give to you is sometimes a great service. Giving of yourself to other people is frequently an important step in your own healing.

◆ PROFESSIONAL HELP

A trained counselor or member of the clergy may help you resolve some of the more complex issues that can develop.

S U P P O R T I N G O T H E R S

If you are the friend or co-worker of someone who is grieving, remember that you too will experience the death of someone you love. Some of the same suggestions listed above may be helpful to remember in reaching out to someone who is grieving:

- ◆ Accept your friend's feelings as they are.
- ◆ Listen without judgement.
- ◆ Communicate openly and honestly when invited.

R E M E M B E R

No matter how deep your sorrow, you are not alone. Others have been there and will help share your load if you will let them. Do not deny them the opportunity. The best memorial to a loved one is a full, rich and growing life.



RESOURCES

There are many fine books written on healing and grief. Consult your local library. The following authors are recommended: Kathleen Fair-Donnelly, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, Harold S. Kushner, and Stephen Levine.

SUPPORT GROUPS AND AGENCIES

Your local hospice or hospital chaplaincy should be able to tell you about resources in your area. Many support groups and service organizations exist for those with AIDS, cancer and other illnesses. These organizations may be a rich resource during illness, dying and bereavement.



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