

## Coping with Grief

Coping with the dying and loss of a loved one can be a very emotional experience. Whether it is a parent, sibling, friend or relative, the reality of losing someone who was close to you can feel overwhelming. While it is true that time heals painful wounds, there are immediate ways that you can deal with the grief and adjust to your loss. By identifying and accepting your feelings, finding comfort in friends and family, and not being afraid to ask for help, you can ease the grieving process.

### The Stages of Grieving

Each of us copes with grief in a different way. However, most people go through the following common stages of grieving:

1. Shock, denial and isolation
2. Anger, rage, envy and resentment
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

If a loved one's death is expected after an illness, family members may have anticipatory grief, which can shorten the process. More severe reactions typically occur after a sudden and unexpected death.

### Common Experiences

It is normal for the grief-stricken to experience the following symptoms:

- Crying
- Inability to sleep
- Lack of interest in eating
- Difficulty in explaining feelings to others
- Exhaustion
- Irritability and uneasiness
- Confusion
- Fear of the future
- Anger (e.g., toward a higher power or toward the deceased)
- Sensitivity (e.g., toward a song or smell that reminds you of the deceased)

Depression and loneliness may set in following the funeral. Relatives and friends have gone back to their lives and may no longer be readily available to offer support.

These feelings should subside as time passes, as you come to accept the reality of the situation, and as you shift from mourning a loved one's death to celebrating his or her life and wonderful memories.

### Grief Relief

There are many ways to ease the mourning process. Here are a few suggestions:

- Do not hold back your feelings: The emotions you experience upon first learning of the loved one's illness or death will probably have an impact upon you immediately. The sadness you feel and the tears you shed are absolutely necessary to promote the healing process. Do not deny these feelings, whether privately or in the comfort of family and friends. Crying is a stress reliever and an endorphin releaser that will make you feel better. Talk through your difficult emotions with loved ones.
- Express your emotions: As a cathartic release, some people like to write letters to the deceased expressing exactly how they feel. Others take solace in their faith and the counsel of a religious leader.
- Be a comforter and a listening ear for friends and family who are also in mourning: It is natural to want to lean on others during this trying time. Be willing to let your grieving relatives and friends lean on you. This instinctual urge to be a caregiver can give you the strength and courage to better cope with your grief.

- Honor the memory of the deceased: In addition to displaying pictures of the deceased at the wake or giving a moving eulogy at the funeral, consider having a post-funeral gathering with family and friends in which photographs and keepsakes of the deceased are shown and discussed. Create a scrapbook with your children, or write a short biography about the deceased. Some survivors like to express their feelings creatively by painting a portrait of the deceased or writing a poem or song about the person. Plan an annual visit to the gravesite. Dedicate part of your work, such as a book, film or other project, to the memory of the deceased, or consider launching a special fund or scholarship in the name of the deceased.
- Get additional assistance: You may choose to talk to a therapist or counselor about your feelings, especially if the sadness lingers. Perhaps you have unresolved issues about the deceased or things you wish you would have told that person before he or she died. Also, consider joining a support group for family survivors and mourners.
- Consider taking a hiatus: Aside from taking funeral leave at work, be prepared to give yourself ample time to heal and reflect. After the funeral, you may want to take a leave from your obligations and just get away for a short time, not necessarily to forget, but to recharge and ponder the impact of the deceased on your life.
- Get on with everyday life: Give yourself enough time to properly mourn and reminisce. Do not be afraid to return to normalcy. Just as the deceased would have wanted you to pay your respects and remember him or her appropriately, he or she would have wanted you to enjoy life and make the most of its opportunities. Go back to your family, your job and your everyday routines with the renewed commitment to do the best you can, and savor every moment.

While it is important to grieve the loss of a loved one, do not forget to cherish his or her life. Death is a sad occasion. However, in time, you will come to realize that this occasion is a celebration of a life, a revisiting of joyful memories shared with a special person that you will treasure for the rest of your life.

## Resources

- National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization: [www.nhpco.org](http://www.nhpco.org)
- The Compassionate Friends: [www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org)
- National Organization for Victim Assistance: [www.trynova.org](http://www.trynova.org)
- American Trauma Society: [www.amtrauma.org](http://www.amtrauma.org)