



GRIEF AND LOSS

Grief is one of the most common experiences of everyday life. We not only experience it when someone close to us dies but in many other situations too. Consider these examples:

- A person or family moves to a new city or country and find that they really miss people, places and customs they are used to.
- Someone retires from work and finds it really hard not going to the office or factory every day. They miss their friends and the job because it was an important part of their life.
- Parents find it hard to adjust to their children growing up and leaving home.
- A couple discover that they cannot have the children they had hoped for or a woman has a miscarriage.
- A person discovers that job skills they learned in another country are not recognised here and they have to train all over again.
- A person has to cope with health problems and feels frustrated because they cannot be as active as they used to be.

What all these situations have in common is loss: the loss of people, hopes and dreams, recognition, health or an important role.

GRIEF, then, is a personal response to any major loss.

It can come when we lose a loved one through death. But we experience it with other losses, too. It affects the whole person. It changes how we feel physically and emotionally. It affects our energy level and our activities. People grieve in different ways and we need to make allowances for this.

Grief is Like a Journey

One thing we have learned about grief is that it takes a long time to get over it. And it's like a journey.

Numbness and Shock

When we experience a loss such as someone dying, losing a job or leaving our country or city the first reaction is often shock. We can't believe it. It takes our feelings a while to catch up with what has happened. One person when their husband died said: 'I felt like I was watching a play. I felt this was happening to someone else but not me. I couldn't believe it was me.' These reactions can last for several days after a loss, and occasionally for longer.

Feeling the Pain

As the numbness wears off we begin to feel the pain. We realise this really is happening to us and that it hurts. We can have many feelings at this time including:

- deep sadness which we may express through crying
- guilt - 'did I do everything I could to prevent this loss' or 'should I have really taken the step to come to this country'
- anger at being in this painful situation
- a deep longing to have the familiar person or situation back again
- depression and lack of energy to do anything

People at this stage need someone who will let them express their painful feelings. They may also want to talk a lot about the person or situation they are missing, or their lost dream. Talking and expressing feelings helps them face what has happened.

Remember, that people express painful feelings differently. Not everyone cries or finds it easy to talk about their grief, but this does not mean they are not hurting. Some people lack energy to do anything. Others push painful feelings away by being very busy.

Letting Go of the Person or Situation

How long people feel the pain of their loss depends on many things including how important the loss was to them. But it may take weeks or even months before they are ready to let go of the person or situation they are leaving behind.

Accepting and Making Changes

When they are ready to let go, people are also more open to accepting the changes. At this stage, a person may need help not only in accepting change but making changes. For example, it may involve a decision to retrain, find new interests or meet new people. We can help people explore options and make decisions.

Grief is Like a Wound Which Takes Time to Heal

Grief is like a painful wound. At first it hurts so much that anything which touches the wounded area is painful - almost too painful to bear. Anything which reminds you of the person for whom you are grieving can be like someone bumping a wound.

Healing takes time. The most helpful thing we can do for people at this painful stage is to let them express their painful feelings and be supportive. It does **not** help to try and cheer them up or tell them they will soon get over it. In fact, most major griefs take months to get over and the death of a loved one can take up to two years to work through.

Expressing the feelings will help the grief to heal. And as the wound heals, people will be ready to rebuild their life. It is rather like a broken limb. We need to give it time to heal before it will be strong enough to walk on again.

(Article courtesy of: Lifeline (24 hour Telephone Counselling & Referral), Melbourne)

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