



THE LIFECARE INSTITUTE

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Grief's Journey

GRIEF'S JOURNEY

No one teaches us how to act or what to say when someone dies. No one can prepare us enough for the intense pain that can come with the loss of a loved one. We may become overwhelmed with emotions and sensations and worry that we are not normal. We want to be rid of the pain for ourselves, or we want to immediately cure others whom we know are grieving. When someone dies, even if we are prepared for the death, we may have difficulty accepting the loss. It is hard to admit that the person is really gone and will not return. Sometimes we think that we see them, or that any minute they will walk through the door. We want life to be as it was before, but death has forced change upon us.

FEELINGS

Death can make us angry. Sometimes we feel angry with the person who died because we feel they abandoned us. And then we think, "How can I be mad at them when they did not choose to die?" The anger comes from the frustration that we were helpless to save them, or from the anxiety we feel as we worry if we can survive without them.

We may feel angry with God and question our faith. The belief in an afterlife and the thought that our loved one has moved on to a better place does not necessarily take away the pain of missing them and the desire to have them back. We may feel angry with an insensitive friend who always seems to say the wrong thing at the wrong time. These feelings can lead us to feel guilty or shameful when we do not realize that anger is a completely normal reaction to the loss of a loved one.

Sometimes we feel anxious due to all of the new changes that come with a loss. Responsibilities that were previously shared may overwhelm or panic us and we may question our own ability to handle them. We may feel disorganized as the mail piles up each day and tedious "business" decisions arise.

The absence of our loved one may cause a feeling of utter loneliness, even when we are surrounded by family members or friends. We may want to avoid others because it is too difficult to try to be social. We worry about the feeling of emptiness and wonder if we will ever feel whole again.

If the loss occurred after a long illness, we may have a sense of relief when the person dies. We may feel comforted by the thought that they are no longer suffering, and yet extremely sad that they are no longer with us. This sadness may bring tears easily or unexpectedly, and may make us feel embarrassed.

We also feel our grief physically. Our chest may get so tight it feels like our heart is going to break. Our stomach may feel hollow. We lack energy and our muscles feel weak, sometimes so weak that we do not want to get out of bed in the morning. We may experience changes in our eating habits or sleeping patterns. Our senses may be more susceptible. Noises may seem louder, making it difficult to be around others. We may have moments when our head pounds or we lose our ability to concentrate. When we think of the person who has died, we physically feel the loss.

COPING

What can we do with this hurt? How can we handle the intense feelings of grief and still go on each day, without any emotional or physical energy?

We need to remember that all these feelings and behaviors are completely normal when we lose a loved one. And, as with any other emotion, we handle grief entirely in our own way. For some, grief begins immediately, while for others it is a delayed experience. In some cases, grief is somewhat mild and goes on for a relatively short period of time. In others, it is all-encompassing and seems to go on forever. Some will publicly show their sadness,

crying often and withdrawing from others. Some will pretend they are doing fine. Others will keep as busy as possible to avoid having free time to think about their pain.

The problem with avoiding grief is that this wound, like other wounds, will not heal without the necessary care and attention. It is important to acknowledge the grief and accept the truth of the death. We need to allow ourselves to experience all the emotions that come with the loss. In other words, we need to take time to grieve.

GRIEF PASSAGES

Often, the initial reaction to hearing of a death is disbelief that the person is truly gone. We may feel numb at the wake, visitation, or funeral. People come from out of town, neighbors stop by, friends bring food. Business and estate details keep us very busy and occupied. It can all be a blur at this stage, and for weeks to follow.

But one day, weeks after the death, we find that things have settled down. The visitors have stopped coming by and everyone is back into their usual routine except for us. We are not prepared for the changes a loss creates and the huge gap that is there in place of the person. After the numbness wears off, we may start to question ourselves, saying, "I thought I was getting better," or "It was so much easier weeks ago."

Nothing can magically take the pain away. Working through grief is a slow process. The entire first year can be hard. Each first holiday, anniversary, and special day without the person hurts. The second year can sometimes be just as hard.

Gradually, we begin to adjust to an environment from which our loved one is missing. At first we think about the person constantly. Everything that touches our senses reminds us of them. Eventually, we will be able to hear their special music, smell their perfume, and watch their favorite television shows without breaking down.

In time, we find ourselves able to laugh and enjoy company without feeling guilty for having fun.

Grief can be confusing. It seems impossible to understand what has happened to us and why it happened. We can question our actions and ask “what ifs” forever, but we may never have the answers. We will not be able to just “put it behind us and move on” as so many friends and family may suggest. And we will never be “over it,” because the person is unforgettable. We will, however, try to live each day as it comes.

SUGGESTIONS FOR COPING

It is not necessary to immediately discard a loved one’s belongings after the death. Wait as long as you feel is appropriate. Keep things that are meaningful to you. Often, clothing has a lingering smell of the loved one and can be very comforting.

Be wary of making any major decisions within the first year. It helps to plan ahead, seek advice, and carefully consider all options regarding selling a house, moving, or any other significant changes.

Talking about the person is an important part of grieving. Telling stories keeps the loved one alive in your memories. Remember the relationship as it was, including both the positive and the negative aspects of the special person.

Writing about feelings can be a powerful tool that helps to focus and identify emotions. Keeping a journal or writing a letter to a loved one is another way to stay connected with the deceased as we journey through grief.

Reach out to family and friends for support. Tell them when you are particularly sad or having a bad day. Let them be a shoulder to cry on, an ear to listen to your sadness.

Take each day as it comes. Do not listen to unhelpful advice that tells you to "get over it" or "move on." Listen to your own heart and the voice inside you. Be gentle with yourself and know that your grieving can take a long time.

Support groups can be helpful for a lot of people. They offer an opportunity for individuals to share their stories of grief with others who are grieving. Join one if you feel it will help.

Remember that special days such as weddings, graduations, birthdays or holidays can be difficult. Sometimes making minor changes or adjustments during these times can make special days easier.

Almost anything you feel is normal. It might feel that your emotions are constantly changing and uncontrollable, or that your physical ailments are a sign of illness. Grief can cause so many reactions, and they are all common and normal.

Finally, remember that while you may feel bad now, it will not always be this bad. You will eventually feel joy, experience laughter, and have a renewed interest in life. But that will only happen by feeling your grief and allowing it to heal you. Your strength and the resilience to create a different yet meaningful life can be a tribute to your loved one.

AN AFFIRMATION FOR THOSE WHO HAVE LOST

I believe there is no denying it: it hurts to lose.

It hurts to lose a cherished relationship with another,
or a significant part of one's own self.

It can hurt to lose that which has united
one with the past,
or that which has beckoned one into the future.

It is painful to feel diminished or abandoned,
to be left behind or left alone.

Yet I believe there is more to losing than just
the hurt and the pain.

For there are other experiences that loss can call forth.

I believe that courage often appears,
however quietly it is expressed,
however easily it goes unnoticed by others;
the courage to be strong enough to surrender,
the fortitude to be firm enough to be flexible,
the bravery to go where one has not gone before.

I believe a time of loss can be a time of learning
unlike any other,

and that it can teach some of life's
most valuable lessons:

In the act of losing, there is something to be found.

In the act of letting go
there is something to be grasped.

In the act of saying "goodbye,"
there is a "hello" to be heard.

For I believe living with loss is about beginnings
as well as endings.
And grieving is a matter of life more than death.
And growing is a matter of mind and heart and soul
more than of body.
And loving is a matter of eternity more than of time.
Finally, I believe in the promising paradoxes of loss:
In the midst of darkness, there can come a great Light.
At the bottom of despair, there can appear a great Hope.
And deep within loneliness,
there can dwell a great Love.
I believe these things because others have shown the way-
others who have lost and then grown through their losing.
others who have suffered and then found new meaning.
So I know I am not alone:
I am accompanied, day after night,
night after day.

(1995 James E. Miller. *"What Will Help Me?"*. Willowgreen Publishing, Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1995)

SUGGESTED READINGS

Grief and Healing

- *Grief One Day at a Time: 365 Meditations to Help You Heal After Loss*
– Alan D. Wolfelt
- *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*
– Megan Devine

Child Loss

- *Healing a Parent's Grieving Heart* – Alan D. Wolfelt
- *The Unspeakable Loss: How Do You Live After a Child Dies?* – Nisha Zenoff

Children and Teen Grief

- *Something Very Sad Happened: A Toddler's Guide to Understanding Death*
– Bonnie Zucker
- *A Parent's Guide to Raising Grieving Children*
– Phyllis R Silverman & Madelyn Kelly
- *Deconstruction Reconstruction A Grief Journal for Teens* – Dougy Center

Parent Loss

- *Healing the Adult Child's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas After Your Parent Dies* – Alan D. Wolfelt
- *FatherLoss: How Sons of All Ages Come to Terms with the Deaths of Their Dads*
– Neil Chethik
- *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss* – Hope Edelman

Spouse Loss

- *Different After You: Rediscovering Yourself and Healing After Grief and Trauma*
– Michelle Neff Hernandez
- *Widow to Widow: Thoughtful, Practical Ideas for Rebuilding Your Life*
– Genevieve Davis Ginsburg
- *The Widower's Toolbox: Repairing Your Life after Losing Your Spouse*
– Gerald J. Schaefer & Tom Bekkers

Sibling Loss

- *Dear Sibling, I want to Say... Grief Journal: Healing After Loss of a Sister or Brother* – S.H. Bando Press
- *Healing the Adult Sibling's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas After Your Brother or Sister Dies* – Alan D. Wolfelt

For additional resources, please visit gilchristcares.org/grief-counseling

Our grief counselors, who are master's prepared and licensed, are available to support you and your loved ones. Our counselors and specially trained volunteers also facilitate a variety of grief support groups, workshops and events for those who have experienced the loss of a loved one.

For more information, call 1.888.823.8880.

THE LIFECARE INSTITUTE



The Lifecare Institute
2000 Medical Parkway, Suite 607
Annapolis, MD 21401
443.332.5800
Luminis.Health/TheLifecareInstitute

TTY Maryland Relay Service: 1.800.735.2258

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