

THE STAGES OF GRIEF

The work of grief cannot be hurried. It takes a great deal of time, usually a year or more. It may be the purest pain you have ever known.

The following are stages of grief that are commonly experienced after a loss. You may not experience all of these, and you may not experience them in this order. It is important to realize, however, that what you are feeling is natural and that, with time, you will heal.

Shock

Some people experience shock after a loss, saying things like “I feel numb” and displaying no tears or emotions. Sometimes there is denial. Gradually the bereaved become aware of what has happened, and they are able to express their emotions. Other people never go through a prolonged stage of shock. They are able to express emotions immediately.

Emotional Release

At some point a person begins to feel and to hurt. It is very important not to suppress your feelings. Suppressed feelings often surface at a later time in unhealthy ways. Shared feelings are a gift, and bring a closeness to all involved.

Preoccupation with the Deceased or the Crisis

Despite efforts to think of other things, a grieving person may find it difficult to shift his/her mind from thoughts about the deceased person. This is not unusual and, with time, should not be a problem.

Symptoms of Some Physical and Emotional Distress

These distresses may come in waves. The most common physical distresses are:

- Sleeplessness
- Tightness in the throat
- A choking feeling
- Shortness of breath
- Deep sighing
- An empty hollow feeling in the stomach
- Lack of muscular power (“It’s almost impossible to climb stairs” or “everything I lift seems heavy”)
- Digestive symptoms and poor appetite

Closely associated with the physical distresses may be certain emotional alternations, the most common of which are:

- A slight sense of unreality
- Feelings of emotional distance from people - that no one really cares or understands
- Sometimes people appear shadowy or very small
- Sometimes there are feelings of panic, thoughts of self-destruction, or the desire to run away or “chuck it all”

These emotional disturbances can cause many people to feel they are approaching insanity, but these feelings are actually quite normal.

Hostile Reactions

You may catch yourself responding with a great deal of anger to situations that previously would not have bothered you. The feelings can be surprising and very uncomfortable. They often make people feel that they are going crazy. Anger can be directed at the doctor, the nurse, God, sometimes even at your loved one who died.

Often, there may be feelings of hurt or hostility toward family members who do not or, for various reasons cannot, provide the emotional support the grieving person may have expected from them. Anger and hostility are normal. Do not suppress your anger. However, it is important that you understand and direct your anger towards what you are really angry at, namely the loss of someone you loved.

Guilt

There is almost always some sense of guilt in grief. The bereaved think of the many things they felt they could have done, but didn't. They accuse themselves of negligence. These hurts pop up in grief. Guilt is normal and should pass with time.

Depression

Many grieving people feel total despair, unbearable loneliness and hopelessness; nothing seems worthwhile. These feelings may be even more intense for those who live alone or who have little family. These feelings are normal and should also pass with time.

Withdrawal

The grieving person often tends to withdraw from social relationships. Their daily routines are often disrupted as well. Life seems like a bad dream. This is normal and will take some effort to overcome, but the rewards are worthwhile.

Resolution and Readjustment

This comes gradually. The memories are still there, the love is still there, but the wound begins to heal. You begin to get on with life. It's hard to believe now, but you will feel better. By experiencing deep emotion and accepting it, you will grow warmth, depth, understanding and wisdom.