

Grief and Loss

UC Davis Counseling Services

Grief is a normal and natural process following a loss. With a traumatic loss, the process is more complicated. People often describe feeling lost and unsure how to proceed. Just as the experience of traumatic grief is different for everyone, so is the healing process.

TRAUMATIC GRIEF GENERALLY OCCURS WHEN A DEATH IS:

- sudden, unexpected, and/or violent
- caused by the actions of another person, an accident, suicide, homicide, or other catastrophe
- due to natural causes without any history of illness

A traumatic death can shatter the world of the survivor. The survivor may try to make sense and create meaning from a terrible loss. The family and friends may search for answers, confronting the fact that life is not fair. Bad things can happen to good people and the world doesn't feel safe.

This shattering of belief about how the world functions intensifies the tasks of grieving. Many times, one's spiritual or philosophical belief system may no longer work, which is yet another loss for the bereaved.

In the initial days, weeks, and months, the individual may go from periods of numbness to intense emotions for brief time periods. In general, it takes two years or more for people go through the grieving process and adapt to a major loss. With a traumatic death, the time period may be longer. Over time, the intensity and frequency of painful periods usually diminish.

People may feel worse a year or more after the death. The numbness that helped to protect them in the early months is gone and the full pain of the loss is very real. Family and friends may have gone back to their own lives, and not be as supportive.

Over the years, holidays and special family events may cause recurrences of grief. When a similar traumatic event occurs, people may feel re-traumatized or that they are reliving their own loss. Involvement with lawsuits or the justice system can cause surges of grief during the entire course of that involvement. As these things occur and if the coping gets more difficult, it may be time to seek some counseling.

COMMON PHYSICAL REACTIONS

- Numbness
- Tightness in the throat or chest
- Shortness of breath
- Sensitivity to loud noises
- Forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating
- Agitation and restlessness
- Cold and nausea

Feeling like things are beyond one's control is normal. Putting more structure into a daily routine by keeping lists and making schedules can help one to feel more in control. Including exercise, healthy meals, and social connection can also help.

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Loss may involve the death of a loved one or friend, the end of a special relationship, or losing an opportunity. People who are grieving may experience many reactions to their loss. Accepting these feelings as natural is an important part of the healing process.

COMMON EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

- **Denial, Shock, and Numbness:** Can distance the grieving person from the loss and may protect them from being overwhelmed. The physical and emotional shock may be prolonged. Persistent memories or dreams about the event may occur for months. Talking or writing about it can help to break the cycle of recurrent thoughts.
- **Fear, Panic, and Anxiety:** Feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope, and even believing something is wrong with oneself, is often part of the grief experience. This is a normal response, but if the anxiety prevents normal routine for a prolonged period, it's important to see a mental health provider.
- **Guilt:** Guilt over things done, or not done, regrets about the past, and/or guilt for surviving. Much of the guilt that people feel is emotional and not rational but knowing this does not always help to alleviate those feelings. When guilt persists, support groups or individual psychotherapy can be helpful.
- **Anger:** A common response to the experience of injustice and powerlessness, anger may be felt toward a higher power, life in general, or those viewed as responsible for the loss.
- **Emotional releases:** Instances of crying or emotional outbursts may accompany realizations about various aspects of the loss and can be important for healing. In recognizing the extent of the loss, one may experience feelings beyond sadness, including depression. Consult with a mental health provider for support with persistence of intense and/or debilitating emotions.

HOW TO HELP SOMEONE WHO IS GRIEVING:

People may go through various phases of grief, and may not know what they need or want. Society promotes many misconceptions about grief (e.g., emotions are only acceptable at funerals, grief is brief, only immediate family are impacted, ...etc.) that may actually hinder the recovery process. There is no single pattern to grief.

Guidelines for helping:

- In the early days and weeks, offer help assertively and concretely. Many times, the family /inner circle may not know what you can do to help, so be available. Offer to get groceries, prepare meals, respond to messages, help with childcare, make calls, post announcements...etc.
- After a few months, support is most needed. Be patient. Allow them time to talk about their grief if they want to, and be prepared to listen. Accept the words and feelings expressed.
- Avoid judging, taking their feelings personally, or telling them what they should feel or do. Avoid clichés (e.g., “you must be strong”, “you have to get on with your life”, “it’s good they didn’t suffer”, etc.) It is not usually helpful for those who are grieving to hear about other people’s losses unless the circumstances are very similar.
- Ask how you can help.
- As time passes, be mindful of anniversaries, holidays, or the birthday of the person who died. On these difficult days, people want to know that their loved ones are remembered.
- Families/inner circle may be involved for years in legal proceedings. Offer help and support during critical times in the process. Help them find resources such as victim and family support and advocacy.
- Most importantly, accept their grieving for what it is: a process following a loss. Allow them to grieve in their own style.
- Encourage self-care. When grieving it is important to attend to physical needs (exercise, nutrition, sleep, and social connection), limit substance use, postpone major decisions, and allow time to grieve and heal.
- Acknowledge your own limitations, and encourage counseling or a support group if appropriate. Consider offering to accompany them through the process of connecting to professional support and other resources.

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