

COPING WITH GRIEF

Losing someone you care about or love is one of the worst things that can happen. Yet, it's something that you're almost certain to experience at some point in your life. When someone you love dies, you'll respond to your loss in your own way. There is no particular right way or wrong way to grieve, but there are ways to make your recovery from grief more complete.

What is grief?

Grief includes the emotions and sensations that come with losing someone or something that is dear to you. When someone close to you dies, not only do you experience a concrete, physical loss, but you also lose what might have been. This means that your pain includes the absence of your loved one's presence (the empty chair at the dinner table, a missed embrace), and also all the milestones in life that will be missed (the holidays not celebrated, the vacations not taken) – every life marker can be an occasion of renewed grief.

What factors influence how you might respond to loss?

How the person died – Your response to an unanticipated death (e.g., an accident or act of violence) may be very different from the grief you feel when someone you love dies after a long illness. Although both are devastating, in the latter case you may have experienced anticipatory grief and thereby been able to start grieving earlier and eventually recover sooner.

Your relationship with the person – The closeness of the relationship, how present the person was in your life (daily, occasional), and the type of support that this person provided you (emotional, financial) all play a role. The nature of the relationship can also make a big difference. If your last interaction was angry or strained this can intensify your experience of grief.

Your assumptions about life – If you see loss and death as an inescapable part of life, you may feel just as much pain as someone who holds a different view, but you may find it easier to recover your equilibrium and begin to enjoy life again sooner.

Support from others – It is essential that you have supportive others in your life who can understand the depth of your loss and help emotionally sustain you as you grieve. If you lose a friend or a cousin, who is more like a sibling, your grief should not be dismissed as less important than an immediate relative.

Are there stages of grief?

In 1969, psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross suggested that there are five stages of grief:

Denial – “This can't be happening to me.”

Anger – “Why is this happening to me? Who is to blame?”

Bargaining – “Make this not happen, and in return I will _____.”

Depression – “I'm too sad to do anything.”

Acceptance – “I'm at peace with what has happened or is happening.”

It is important to realize that these stages originally captured the feelings of individuals facing a terminal illness and were never meant to encompass the experience of all grieving people. As Kübler-Ross later wrote (2005), “They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is no typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss.”

Although there is no one way to grief, some experts have recently described three general categories of grieving to include a beginning, middle, and end.

Shock – Often the first reaction to loss. Shock can last a few minutes or days. You might feel numb or be in disbelief. You might find it difficult to make simple decisions or carry out your daily routine.

Suffering – When the shock wears off, the pain begins and can last for weeks, months, and intermittently for years. You may experience waves of emotions, such as sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety or any combination of these. You might also experience physical symptoms, such as loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping, and chest pain or behavioral symptoms, such as withdrawing from your normal social activities, mood swings, and difficulty concentrating.

Resolution – This is not the end of pain, but the ability to reconnect to the interesting and joyful parts of your life – to refocus your attention from your pain to living a life with meaning and purpose.

How can I help myself?

Gather information. Develop your understanding of the grieving process. Talk with others who have experienced a significant loss, members of bereavement support organizations, and members of your faith or spiritual community. Use bibliographic resources to learn more, such as *How to Go on Living when Someone you Loves Die* (Therese Rando, 1988) or *Understanding Grief: Helping Yourself Heal* (Alan Wolfelt, 1992).

Participate in rituals. Say “goodbye.” Ceremonies and rituals help you to make the “unreal” more real and to move toward accepting and integrating your loss. Attend the funeral or memorial service. Create a scrapbook or artwork about the person. Create a memorial in her or his honor. Plan for and mark important anniversaries in ways that are meaningful to you.

Care for yourself physically. Get enough sleep, eat sensibly, and exercise regularly.

Care for yourself emotionally. Give yourself permission to grieve. Allow yourself time to reflect, explore, and experience your thoughts and feelings.

Care for yourself logistically. Reevaluate the extent to which preexisting goals and deadlines are realistic. Consider delaying making major life decisions.

Express your feelings. Allow yourself to experience the full range of your emotions. This includes not only sadness, but also fear, guilt, anger, resentment, and relief. Avoiding your emotions through excessive activity, denial, or abuse of substances can complicate and prolong your pain.

Seek support. Even if you pride yourself on being self-sufficient, seek support from your friends and family. Let people who care about you what you are going through. Knowing that others know and understand what you’re feeling can help you feel better, less alone, and help you to heal. If religion or spirituality is important to you, talk with a member of the clergy or a spiritual advisor. Consider joining a support group for people who have experienced a similar loss.

Consider seeking professional help, particularly if your grief undermines your everyday functioning at school, home, or work.

How can I help a friend?

Talk openly to your friend about her or his loss and feelings. Don't try to offer false cheer or minimize the loss.

Be available. Call, stop by to talk, share a meal or an activity. Your presence and companionship are important.

Listen and be patient. Listening is an often overlooked gift you can provide. Allow your friend to vent her or his feelings. Avoiding judging and limit advice-giving — listening itself is very powerful and comforting.

Take some action. Send a card, write a note, or call. This is important not just immediately after the loss, but especially later, when grief is still intense but when others have resumed their daily lives and support for your friend may have dwindled.

Encourage self care. Encourage your friend to care for herself or himself physically, emotionally, spiritually, and socially. Encourage your friend to seek out support and/or professional help, if appropriate.

Accept your own limitations. Accept that you cannot eliminate the pain your friend is experiencing. Grief is a natural, expected response to loss and each person must work through it in her or his own way and pace. Be supportive, but care for yourself too.

What are additional resources?

USD Counseling Center: The Counseling Center offers counseling to USD students, and consultation to USD faculty, staff, and families of students. The center staff can also refer you to resources in the community. For more information, call 619-260-4655, explore the rest of this Website, or stop by Serra Hall 300. Our walk-in hours are from 11 am to 3 pm, Mondays through Fridays.

University Ministry: The staff at University Ministry offers pastoral counseling and spiritual guidance to USD students, faculty, and staff. For more information, call 619-260-4735, or stop by the Hahn University Center 238.

Adapted from http://www.helpguide.org/mental/grief_loss.htm