

Coping with Loss

Although we experience many kinds of losses, the loss of a loved one and the loss of control over our lives caused by life-threatening illness produce the most intense grief reactions. Unfortunately, we live in a society that has stigmatized the expression of painful emotions. Emotions that accompany grief—anguish, anger, sadness, and despair—once honored and recognized as normal, understandable, and appropriate to a significant loss are now feared and viewed as dysfunctional and inappropriate. We pay a heavy price for this: isolation and feelings of alienation in times of grieving. Ironically, prohibiting feeling such emotions interferes with the normal process of grief, a process which ultimately heals us and allows us to go on.

What Happens When We Grieve?

In grief, it is as if a powerful force outside of our control has propelled us into a foreign land, a new dimension of reality in which we experience our emotions in such an intense and acute way that we sometimes wonder if we are losing our minds. The waves of yearning and despair, the anxiety and anger, that buffet us constantly, are hallmarks of this process. This intense suffering is a normal reaction to loss. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' well-known outline of the stages of the grief process—from denial and shock, through anger, bargaining, and depression, and ultimately, to acceptance—has allowed us to recognize that this is both normal and necessary. Yet, even though these stages provide us with a way to understand what is happening to us, it is helpful to keep in mind that grief does not move in a linear progression, but is a constantly moving process that flows forward and backward. For every two steps forward we often take a step backward. Often when we think we have finally come to believe and accept the reality of our loss, we find ourselves pulled back into disbelief again. It is through this repeated shifting between the different stages that the pain subsides, that resolution takes place, and we find ourselves again able to feel that life has meaning.

The Journey Through Grief

What do we need to successfully complete this journey through grief? What do we need to cope with this traumatic interruption in the continuity of our lives and the wholeness of our person? In the first days and weeks of grieving, we need a respite from the demands of everyday living and to allow ourselves to be dependent on others. We need to be free to experience the full range of our emotions and our pain and not to have to act as if nothing has happened. We need the freedom to express these feelings, either by putting them into words or by crying, screaming, and wailing. We are fortunate if we have family or friends who understand this need and can allow us to do this. Professional counseling, spiritual guidance, or a support group may also be very helpful. We also need to review the events and circumstances that led to the loss and have the freedom to do this, over and over again. This

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may seem obsessive in other moments of our lives, but it is normal during grief. It helps us accept the reality of the loss and allows us, through this repetition, to “empty out” some of our most immediate and acute pain to free some of our emotional energy for healing. In the case of the loss of a loved one, we need to revisit and remember our relationship. This, too, needs to be done over and over again. Reviewing our memories allows us to internalize the person we have lost and to integrate our relationship with them. It helps us to realize that the loved one will always be a part of us and that the relationship will always contribute to who we are.

Conclusion

Finally, we need to share our grief with someone who will not judge, blame, or criticize us as weak, out-of-control, or self-pitying when we express our intense feelings openly. This makes us feel understood and helps us to reconnect with others. Through connectedness to other people, we can restore a sense of meaning in our lives and heal. When we complete our journey through grief, we will be able to reinvest the energy that has been bound to what we have lost into new relationships, activities, and causes. Our lives can take on fresh meaning through the assumption of new roles and the development of new parts of ourselves. In this way, loss can lead to growth and positive change.

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