



Mental Health Association of Northern Kentucky

A LEADER IN PROVIDING ADVOCACY, EDUCATION, AND SERVICES THAT PROMOTE MENTAL WELLNESS

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GRIEF: THE REACTION TO LOSS

- It is a natural and normal reaction to loss.
- It produces physical and emotional responses.
- It is the most universal of all human experiences and also the most painful.

No two people will experience a loss in exactly the same way. Your grief will be as individual as your fingerprint. No one can tell you how to grieve. There are no formulas for how much a loss will hurt or how long grief will last, so do not compare yourself to others in similar situations.

Although grief is experienced by everyone in different ways, there are common patterns and feelings that most individuals will share. Allow yourself to feel these normal emotions so that you can get through the grief and go on with life. It is important to understand what some normal reactions might be. This will make your behavior more predictable and less frightening to experience. Knowledge of the process of grief will help you to have a better sense of control over your reaction to loss.

Your grief will be different depending on the circumstances of death and your coping strategies. A sudden death, an accident, a suicide, or an untimely death may complicate your mourning. If you face a change of environment or a loss of financial security as a consequence of death, this can complicate your grief.

The kind of relationship you had with the deceased is very important to the intensity of your grief. The closer your emotional attachment is to the deceased, the greater your potential for having a strong grief reaction. It might be said that grief is the price you pay for love. Your age, sex, religious beliefs and previous experiences with death will all influence your grief. In short, no one can predict how you will experience grief.

Common Reactions to Loss

Below, you will find a list of some of the behaviors of grief. You may feel many of these; you may feel few. Your grief will be different from anyone else. Remember your family and friends will be grieving in their own unique way. Do not expect them to feel as you do. This will just disappoint you and make you feel all the more isolated.

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Certain reactions to death are so common that almost everyone experiences them. The period of shock is not long. If the death was unexpected, you may find yourself denying at first that the person has died. This response is nature's way of insulating you from what is happening. Another immediate reaction to a death is anger. Most of us were taught as children to avoid anger. Therefore you may feel guilty when your anger will not go away. You may also feel guilty for any number of reasons. It is common to feel guilty, even for being alive.

Depression is probably the hardest part of grief. You may be flooded with despair and feel as if it will never get better. Please try to remember that it does. The anguish occurs when you realize the full impact and the meaning of your loss. The periods of very intense longing and sorrow will diminish with time.

You will not move from one mood to another in some kind of sequence. You will probably have many feelings all at once. Sometimes people become concerned they are getting worse as time progresses rather than better. You may feel worse in six months that you expected you would. Do not set expectations for yourself by the calendar. Take one step at a time, one hour at a time, and one day at a time.

As time goes on and you allow yourself to feel the pain of loss, your grief will diminish. You will not always feel the way you do now. This does not mean you will forget your loved one: it means you accept their death and are coping with life without them. Even though your relationship with your loved one has changed forever, its existence and your feelings live on forever.

For most people talking with trusted friends is an effective means of releasing emotions and undergoing healing. Activity is another crucial ingredient of the healing process. Work has a therapeutic value. If you are at home, try to follow a schedule. Physical activity is difficult to undertake while your feeling depressed, but it can be very restoring to heart and soul. After the early period of grief has passed, finding a group to join can also be helpful. Sometimes, the only thing that keeps us going is the knowledge that humans can transform something hurtful into positive learning. Ask yourself this question, which opens doors to the future: Now that this has happened, what shall I do about it?

All of us have both the right and the responsibility to take our losses seriously. Grief, when ignored or denied, can harm us in countless ways. Facing our losses is part of how we create our tomorrows.

Because grief can be so painful and overwhelming, it frightens us. Many people wonder if the feelings they have are normal. You may be feeling one or more of the following physical and emotional responses.

- A feeling of tightness in their throat or heaviness in their chest
- Have an empty feeling in their stomach and lost their appetite
- Feel guilty at times and angry at other times
- Feel restless and look for activity but find it difficult to concentrate

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- Feel as though the loss is not real: that it did not happen
- Sense the loved one's presence, as in finding themselves expecting the person to walk in the door at the usual time, hearing their voice, or seeing their face
- Wander aimlessly, forget, and neglect to finish things that they have started around the house
- Have difficulty sleeping, and dream of their loved one frequently
- Experience an intense preoccupation with the life of the deceased
- Assume mannerism or traits of their loved one
- Feel guilty or angry over things that happened or did not happen in their relationships with the deceased
- Feel intensely angry at the loved one for leaving them
- Feel as though they need to take care of other people who seem uncomfortable around them by politely not talking about their feelings of loss
- Need to tell and retell and remember things about the loved one and the experience of his or her death
- Feel their mood change over the slightest things
- Cry at unexpected time

All of these are natural and normal grief responses. It is important to cry and talk with people when you need to. By learning about the process of grief and learning also to express your feelings about the experience, you are helping yourself to arrive at a healthy readjustment of your life and reinvestments of your emotional energy.

Immediate Reactions

Impact Phase -- The first few weeks following the death

Physical	Emotional	Behavioral
Numbness	Shock	Denial
Shortness of breath	Relief	Disorientation
Heavy Chest	Release	Crying
Empty Feeling		Listlessness

Later Reactions

Recoil --After the shock wears off, you begin to feel your feelings once again:

Physical	Emotional	Behavioral
Chest pains	Anger	Over-reactive
Lack of energy	Fear	Hyper-sensitive
Headaches	Guilt	Running
Fatigue	Panic	Sleeplessness
Vulnerability to illness	Loneliness	Isolation
Tension	Depression	Need to relive death

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Adjustment/Accommodation

It's time when you begin to think you are going to "make it."

Looking toward the future	Taking responsibility	New interests
Doing things for oneself	Reconstructing your life	Personal growth

Grief and Depression

It is important to remember that grief has no time line and there may not be a smooth transition from one phase to another. However, you should progressively feel better over time, i.e., 3, 6, 9 and much better within a year. If you are not feeling better, your depressive feelings may have become Clinical Depression – a very treatable illness.

If prolonged grief is accompanied by any of the following symptoms, you may want to seek medical attention.

- Intense grief
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities previously enjoyed
- Guilt unconnected with the loved one's death
- Inability or refusal to acknowledge the reality of death
- Intense emotion at the mention of the deceased, years after the death
- Inability to function at one's usual level
- Recurrent thoughts of one's own death (not just a fear of dying)
- Persistent feelings of worthlessness
- Difficulty sleeping
- Weight loss or change in appetite

Compiled by the Mental Health Association from Linnemann Funeral Homes provider of grief support for children and adults and AARP Newsletter.