

The Grief Experience

Grief is the natural, healthy, spontaneous, unlearned, normal, emotional, healing process that occurs after a significant loss. Grief is experienced uniquely by each of us, and is often experienced in waves, with emotions, thinking, physical, and social responses coming and going in terms of the intensity, duration, and order of our reactions to the loss. In addition, there are many other variables that can affect our grief reaction and the grief experience.

Emotional Components of loss can include:

- Shock, numbness, feeling of unreality
- Helplessness
- Vulnerability
- Fearfulness
- Sadness
- Anger, irritability
- Emptiness, loneliness
- Guilt
- Carelessness, harming oneself or others in any way
- Outbursts, euphoria

Cognitive Components of loss can include:

- Slowed and/or disorganized thinking
- Confusion, aimlessness, difficulty concentrating
- Preoccupation, rumination
- Unaffected, no thoughts at all about the person or the circumstances
- Dreams
- Decreased self-esteem
- Altered perceptions, sensing the presence of the deceased person

Physical Components of loss can include:

- Fatigue, sleep disturbance
- Decreased or increased appetite
- Physical distress, nausea
- Anxiety, hypo- or hyperactivity
- Greater susceptibility to illness

Social Components of loss can include:

- Being unaware of others' needs
- Passivity
- Withdrawing from or avoiding others
- Decreased work productivity
- Loss of interest in usual pleasures, including hobbies, relationships and/or sex
- Strained relationships, differences in grieving needs between self and others

Variables that can affect your grief reaction:

- Your own history of past losses, through deaths, divorce, relocation, lost dreams, phase of life changes. Violations of one's safety (accidents, fire, personal trauma, world crises), or health changes
- Your current personal and situational stressors
- Your personal beliefs in a faith tradition or spiritual practice
- Your cultural and family expectations about loss

If the loss is anticipated or unanticipated
If the loss is marked by traumatic events
The degree to which closure with the person was possible
A “loss out of season,” for the person who has died or for you
Your ability to share the loss with others
Your coping style and use of stress management resources
Working through past hurts and forgiveness issues
Finding a way to make meaning of the loss

Grieving is a Process

There is no correct timetable for the waves and reactions of grief. Yet, as you work through your grief, you can regain your balance, develop a sense of completeness, and re-engage in life in a deeper way. Your self-awareness in the process can be a personal journey and also one you may wish to share with others, through family, friendship, and work circles, or through professional and community resources.

Adapted from The Center for Grief Recovery and Therapeutic Services