

Healthy You - Grief and Loss

Washington State Employee Assistance Program

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We encounter many traumatic and painful losses throughout our lifetime. The death of a family member, co-worker, friend or beloved pet can cause intense grief; but any loss including illness or injury, the loss of a job, financial stability, and a cherished dream can also cause painful emotions. We may move or change jobs; friendships fade; finances dwindle; we separate or divorce. Every change desired or not, large or small involves loss. Losses, especially significant or painful ones become part of the fabric of our lives.

Is There Any Way to Avoid Grief?

Losing someone or something you love is very painful. After a significant loss you may experience all kinds of difficult and surprising emotions, such as shock, anger, and guilt. Sometimes it may feel like the sadness will never let up. While these feelings can be frightening and overwhelming they are normal reactions to loss. Accepting them as part of the grieving process and allowing yourself to feel what you feel is necessary for healing.

The Grief Response

Reactions to loss vary widely from person to person and may cover a confusing range of emotions. The stages of grief are often unpredictable. Some people are overwhelmed; others feel numb and try to postpone the pain. Reactions depend on our personalities, the type of loss, the existence of previous losses, and the social support we receive. The time it takes for an emotional wound to heal varies from person to person. "Our grieving is as individual as our lives" (Elizabeth Kubler-Ross.) While you do not have to go through each stage in order to heal, grief often includes: shock and denial, anger, grief, sadness, fear and finally, acceptance and healing.

Strategies for Moving Through Loss

The single most important factor in healing from loss is having the support of other people. Even if you are not comfortable talking about your feelings under normal circumstances it is important to express them when you are grieving. Wherever the support comes from, accept it and do not grieve alone. Connecting to others will help you heal. Here are some ways to find support:

- Turn to friends and family.
- Draw comfort from your faith.
- Join a support group – Grief can feel very lonely, even when you have loved ones around. Sharing your sorrow with others who have experienced similar losses can help.

- Talk with a therapist or grief counselor.
- Face your feelings – You can try to suppress your grief, but you cannot avoid it forever. In order to heal, you have to acknowledge the pain. Trying to avoid feelings of sadness and loss only prolongs the grieving process. .
- Plan ahead for grief triggers. Anniversaries, holidays, and milestones can awaken memories and feelings. Be prepared for the emotional intensity that you may feel and know that it is completely normal.
- Do not let anyone tell you how to feel and do not tell yourself how to feel either. Your grief is your own, and no one else can tell you when it is time to move on.
- Take care of your body. The mind and body are one, not separate. When you feel good physically, you also feel better emotionally.
- Express your feelings in tangible or creative ways. Write about your feelings of loss in a journal; write a letter saying the things you never had a chance to say; make a scrapbook; become involved in a cause or organization that is important to you or in memory of the person you are grieving.
- Give yourself simple pleasures. Indulging in a bubble bath, renting a movie, taking a vacation or going to ball games are good distractions that can, at least for a while, provide relief.

When to seek professional help

If, over time, your emotions remain as intense or worsen, it may be that your grief has developed into a more serious problem such as complicated grief or clinical depression. Grief and depression, while appearing similar, are not the same. Grief can have moments of pleasant memories and happiness while feelings of emptiness and despair are constant with depression. If you are not healing, ask for help from an experienced grief counselor or mental health counselor.

Symptoms of Depression:

- Intense, pervasive sense of guilt
- Thoughts of suicide or preoccupation with dying
- Feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness
- Slow speech or body movement
- Inability to function at work, home, and/or school

*“Life isn’t about waiting for the storm to pass it’s learning to dance in the rain”
Unknown*