

Individual Reactions to Bereavement

Losing someone you love or care for is painful. The feelings can be so intense that some people wonder if what they're feeling is normal. Sometimes people worry that their family members aren't coping well with their loss. The following information may help answer some of your questions and increase your understanding of the grieving process.

Bereavement, Grief, and Mourning

Bereavement is the period after a loved one dies when grief is experienced and mourning occurs. There is no rule or formula for how long one spends in bereavement. For most, healing occurs slowly but surely. Some begin to feel better within weeks or months, others not for years. The length of bereavement can depend on several factors, including the person's personality, relationship to the deceased, coping skills, level of support from others, and cultural and religious background.

Grief is a universal reaction to loss. We can experience grief after any loss, including loss of a marriage, job, or health. The loss of a loved one often causes the most intense type of grief reaction.

Mourning is the way people show grief in public. People mourn in many different ways, based on beliefs, cultural customs or religious practices. Some examples are Buddhists praying weekly during a funeral period of 49 days; Catholics participating in the funeral practices of a wake, funeral mass, and final graveside farewell; and Jewish mourners undergoing a seven-day period, called shiva, that includes following certain practices such as covering mirrors.

The Process of Grief

It may be helpful to understand the grieving process as a roller coaster, full of ups and down, highs and lows. Like many roller coasters, the ride tends to be rougher in the beginning; the lows may be deeper and longer. The difficult periods usually become less intense and shorter as time goes by, but working through a loss is a process. Even years after a loss, especially at special events such as a family wedding or the birth of a child, one may still experience a grief reaction.

The grief process is natural, and as personal as one's fingerprints. People in bereavement shouldn't judge or compare themselves to others. There are no right or wrong reactions to a death, but grief seems to affect us on several levels: emotional, physical, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual. Grieving people often experience some of the following reactions:

Emotional: *Feeling numb, shock, disbelief, or denial; Anxiety over being separated from loved one; Guilt and regret; Anger; Profound sadness; Relief (for example, if the person died after a long illness)*

Physical: *Sleep disruption; Dreams, illusions, hallucinations of the deceased; Loss of appetite or weight loss; Exhaustion; Lowered immunity; Other physical symptoms such as nausea, palpitations, tightness in the throat, or digestive problems*

Cognitive: *Disorganization in daily routine; Preoccupation; Distraction*

Behavioral: *Searching for places or possessions shared with the deceased; Withdrawal; Loss of interest in hobbies, groups, previous activities, self-care*

Spiritual: *Anger at one's God or higher power; Questioning one's religion or belief*

Coping With Grief

Research has verified that people with strong social support tend to cope better after a significant loss such as the death of a loved one. Although they might not be used to or comfortable with talking about their inner thoughts and feelings, these individuals don't grieve alone. They get support from family, friends, neighbors, fellow members of a religious organization, coworkers, or a support group.

Another important and necessary component of coping with grief is self-care. Not paying attention to physical and emotional needs can worsen how grieving individuals feel physically and emotionally. Looking after one's health by walking or getting some other form of exercise is critical, as is being able to express feelings by writing or talking them out with a nonjudgmental supportive listener.

Complicated Grief

For some people, the intense pain of grief doesn't diminish over time and continues to interfere with daily living. About 1 in 10 people in bereavement experience what is called complicated grief. Signs include intense longing for and intrusive thoughts of the deceased, denial of the death, difficulty moving on with life, and an inability to carry out normal daily functions.

People experiencing complicated grief should seek professional medical or mental health consultation. If not addressed, this intensity of grieving can lead to significant emotional problems and life-threatening health problems, including suicide.

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

Please remember that Workplace Solutions, your EAP, is here to help. Many people have used the program to make sense of their feelings of grief and loss. Although family members are supportive, it sometimes helps to talk with someone who has experience in helping others cope with the death of a loved one. Please call us at **(800) 327-5071**.

Sources

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