

Grief and Loss

Judith Viorst, in her book *Necessary Losses*, argues that life actually begins with loss. The symbiotic mother-child bond ends in order for a new life to begin. This initial loss will be one of many throughout the course of life. Loss cannot be avoided. Life changes and transitions, both positive and negative, contain aspects of loss as well as possibilities for growth and change. Examples include: moving away from home, changing jobs, sending a child off to college, divorce, loss of a friendship, change in financial status, retirement, loss of health, loss of a hope or dream, etc.

The most difficult loss that anyone will ever experience, however, is the death of someone they love. The pain of this loss will be overwhelming, intensely painful, and will impact one's ability to cope with normal day to day relationships, work responsibilities, etc. Grief is the natural response to loss. Everyone experiences loss differently and so everyone grieves differently. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, and there is no predictable timetable for grieving. It is important to remember that in the early stages of grief, almost anything is normal to feel or experience. It is not unusual for some people to feel scared by the intensity of their emotions. Irritability/anger, avoidance and isolation, lashing out at loved ones, profound sadness, guilt, and anxiety are among the common emotional responses to loss. Physical problems such as headaches, gastrointestinal upset, fatigue, and general aches and pains may also appear.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross--- The Stages of Grief

In 1969 Dr. Kubler-Ross, a psychiatrist, introduced what has been called the five stages of grief. These stages are typical responses that most people experience, but they are not meant to imply that working through grief happens in a logical or orderly way.

- Denial: Shock about the loss of a loved one is common. If someone you love has died, you may feel numb and in disbelief.
- Anger: It is common to wonder *why* your loved one died and you may want to blame someone—yourself, doctors, God.
- Bargaining: This is the stage of “what if” or “if only”. An example of this would be promising something to God in exchange for a loved one being spared death. In this stage, it is typical to try to find ways to negotiate with the situation, with doctors, with God, etc.
- Depression: This is a time of deep sadness.
- Acceptance: This means accepting the reality that a loved one is no longer present in your life and understanding the permanent reality of this. It does not mean that you are OK with your loved one being gone. Rather, it means that you begin to find a new “normal” and adjust to life without your loved one.

It's important to know that these stages (and feelings in each) are normal. Some people progress through these stages more easily than others; some people go through these stages but not in any particular order, and others may only go through some of the stages of grief. Most people will experience the grieving process like a roller coaster ride with ups and downs. You do not have to go through each and every stage in order to heal, but the stages of grief remind us that healing happens over time.

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Here are some tips to keep in mind when dealing with a loss

- Acknowledge your pain—this is an important step in order to heal.
- Express your feelings. Be honest about how you feel. Don't be ashamed of expressing your true feelings.
- Express yourself in creative ways. Journaling, drawing and other forms of creativity can be therapeutic. Some examples include writing a letter to a loved one and saying things that you may never have had the chance to say, or making a photo album/scrapbook to honor your loved one's memory.
- Be kind to yourself. Don't negate or judge your feelings. Accept that grief is a process and don't expect yourself to "just get over it."
- Set realistic expectations for yourself about what you can and cannot do immediately following a loss. Do whatever you need to do that helps you deal with your loss in a healthy way.
- Try to engage in hobbies or activities that you typically enjoy. Routines can provide comfort and keep you connected to others.
- Remember the mind body connection. Be sure to get enough sleep and eat well. Avoid using alcohol or drugs to cope.
- Reach out. Make face-to-face contact with family and friends who can provide compassion and support.
- Draw support from your faith.
- Plan ahead for special events like anniversaries, holidays, birthdays, etc. Anticipating for change may make these times less difficult to get through.
- Do seek professional help. If you feel as though you simply can't bear your grief, contact a therapist who has the experience to help you work through your pain. Your EAP can help—just call **315-474-4036**.
- Join a support group.

Grief or Depression?

The sadness of losing someone may never completely go away. However, with time and support, the acceptance of the loss should eventually ease the raw, intense pain that is normal to feel when someone you love has died. If your grief worsens over time and you find that you are consumed with despair, that you find no pleasure in your life, that you stay disconnected from others, and that you are not able to resume your day-to-day activities, you may be suffering from a more complicated form of grief, or even depression. This is something you should not ignore. Call your EAP at **315-474-4036** for assistance. Your EAP counselor is there to help.

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Here are some tips to keep in mind when helping a grieving person

- Understand the grief process. Knowing some of the basics about how people grieve will allow you to better support a grieving person. For example, knowing that bereaved people have intense emotions, that grief is an individual process and therefore different for everyone, and that there is no right or wrong way to grieve, will allow you to better help.
- Be present. You may not know the right thing to say, but simply being with someone can help him or her cope with his or her pain.
- Respect the wishes of the grieving person. Be respectful of how they need to grieve and don't take it personal if they resist your attempt to assist them.
- Know your limits. You cannot take away someone's pain, but that doesn't mean that your comfort and support will be in vain.
- Don't take things personally. A grieving person may not be able to acknowledge your efforts to help and for a time, they may not be able to hold up their part of the relationship. Remember, it's not about you.
- Don't be afraid to use the word died. Using words that appropriately fit the situation will be validating to the grieving person and will encourage them to be open with you.
- Offer help in practical ways. For example, sending a cooked meal, offering to run an errand, helping with household chores or childcare, etc.

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Here are some tips for managers

When an employee loses a loved one, every aspect of his or her life is impacted. This includes his or her work routine. Your employee will need time away from work and he or she may look to you for an explanation of policies related to bereavement and personal time. Your leadership will be important to not only your grieving employee but also other employees in the same department or office. Everyone deals with loss differently and everyone moves through the grieving process at his or her own pace. Having some general knowledge about loss and grief can help you support a grieving employee. Returning to work is part of the recovery process. Here are some tips for how you can help an employee who is grieving.

- Make contact with your employee as soon as possible. Be sure to offer your sympathy and listen to what your employee wants to share. Be sure to respect confidentiality.
- Ask your employee if he or she would like you to disseminate information about funeral arrangement or memorial services to co-workers.
- Help organize a way to offer group support to the employee. This might be sending a card or flowers or planning for people to attend a memorial together.
- Assure your employee that his or her work will be reassigned while they are out.
- Encourage your employee to tend to his or her emotional needs.
- When your employee returns to work expect that the first few days are going to be difficult. Check in with your employee periodically to see how he or she is doing.
- Set clear work expectations. It is a good idea to expect your employee to be productive, but he or she may not perform to his or her potential when first back to work. Try to be compassionate and patient and realistic in your expectations.
- Promote teamwork
- Be aware that cultural factors impact how people deal with loss.
- Pay attention and be aware of any signs of prolonged grief or unusual behaviors.
- Know about the Employee Assistance Program and how the EAP can be a resource for you. If you need support or consultation about how to help one of your employees, the EAP is only a phone call away (315-474-4036)
- Tell your employee about the benefits of the EAP and encourage them to call.