

Grief and Loss

The death of someone close to us is one of life's most stressful events. We fear loss of companionship and the changes it will bring to our lives. It takes time to heal and each of us responds differently.

The Stages of Grieving

People usually experience the following three stages, but may jump back and forth between them. The length of time it takes to go through them will vary.

Stage 1: Numbness or Shock

Immediately after news of death, a person will likely experience a period when he/she feels very little except a sense of unreality. Some people "sleepwalk" through the funeral and necessary details which follow death.

Stage 2: Disorganization

Eventually, feelings begin to come alive again. Some physical symptoms, such as tightness in the throat, shortness of breath, the need to sigh frequently or extreme fatigue, may be experienced. Emotional symptoms can include anger at the loved one for dying and overwhelming guilt. The life of the deceased person and the events leading up to the actual death may be reviewed. The bereaved person may agonize over things he/she believed were done wrong or could have been done for the deceased. Most frightening of all can be the feeling of losing emotional control.

Stage 3: Re-organization

Eventually, there will be periods when the bereaved person does not dwell on the loss, and focus on daily tasks is possible. A great hurt is never completely forgotten; rather, it takes its place among life's other, more immediate demands. Deeper friendships may be formed through the process of sharing. A new awareness of the preciousness of life and of the value of people and experiences may be found.

How To Help Someone Who Is Grieving

It is difficult to become part of another person's grieving process unless you are invited to become involved.

Helping with Stage 1: Be a supporter. You can help with practical tasks.

Helping with Stage 2: Be a listener. Accept the other person's need to vent emotions and to tell repeated stories about the life and death of his/her loved one. People need to talk about their loss.

Helping with Stage 3: Be an encourager. Help people to regain touch with the world around them. Involvement in social activities, special interest groups, and hobbies could make a positive difference for the person.

If reactions are extreme at any stage, professional help could be useful. Providing the support necessary to assist the bereaved to take this step is a meaningful way of helping.

How To Cope With Your Own Grief

- Be with caring people
- Take enough time
(there is no “normal” grieving period)
- Express your feelings
- Accept a changed life
(routines may need to change)
- Reach out for help
- Take care of your physical health
- Support others in their grief
- Come to terms with your loss
- Make a new beginning
- Postpone major life changes

Ambiguous Loss

When someone we love dies, we can often take comfort in the rituals associated with the grieving period. A support network usually helps us move through the loss, and a healing journey is begun. When the loss is ambiguous, any progression can be extremely difficult.

Pauline Boss (in the book, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*) describes two kinds of ambiguous loss. One experience of loss is when an individual is physically absent but psychologically present. This may be because the person’s survival is not known, such as when a child has been abducted or a refugee is displaced. A person can be missing, but there is no proof of death, no funeral, minimal public grieving, and no closure.

The other type of ambiguous loss is when a person is present in body, but not in mind. An individual may have Alzheimer’s disease, chronic mental illness (e.g., depression) or a chemical addiction, which prevents him/her from fully participating in life. Family members can also be lost through divorce and/or relationship break-ups, adoption, workaholism, screen addiction, and physical disabilities.

Both situations present stress because the person is “here, but not here”. The person who is present in body but not in mind no longer participates in routine talk, decision-making, chores or other basic responsibilities. The other people in the group are required to work around the “absent” individual. There is so much unknown that it can seem impossible to move forward with life in any way. People’s lives can come to a near-halt because they cannot properly mourn someone who is not completely gone. The long-term emotions of ambiguous loss fluctuate between hope and hopelessness. The stress that ambiguous loss causes can deaden all feelings, and result in burnout.

It is important to recognize and accept the situation when an ambiguous loss occurs. Denying or avoiding the situation only serves to add to the ambiguity. If the bereaved individuals can find some ways to change even though the ambiguity remains, there might be a way to move through the loss. The goal is to balance grief over what was lost with participation in what is still possible. Many situations do not allow for closure. Divorced spouses must maintain a relationship related to the children. Is the “ex” still a part of the family or not? When two people break up, how do the couple’s friends proceed in the friendships? These are the kinds of questions that begin to be worked through in the healing journey through ambiguous loss.