LEARN TO UNDERSTAND GRIEF AND LOSS

COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES (CAPS)

THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY
The death of someone close to us is a great loss and “grief” describes all the emotions we feel after this significant loss. The grief experience is a natural response, which may take many forms. In many cases the emotions we feel may be unfamiliar or overwhelming. We may feel isolated and think that no one could possibly understand what we are experiencing. It can at times seem as though we are on an emotional roller coaster. These experiences can also be particularly challenging and difficult when we encounter grief and loss for the first time. This is all normal.
The experiences of grief are many and varied. They may include shock, numbness, sadness, despair, loneliness and confusion. Symptoms of depression or anxiety (e.g. poor sleep, reduced appetite, low mood, hopelessness, fear) may also be present. You may also feel anger, guilt, regret or relief.

Physically you may also feel different. At times you may be tired with no energy or feel sick in the stomach and have headaches. People experiencing grief after the death of someone close may also be more vulnerable to physical health problems.

Sometimes many things or situations might remind you of the person. At other times you may have difficulty recalling the person’s face or voice. All of these feelings are normal and may come and go in “waves”.

Have a look at the short clip above about the experiences of grief.
HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE UNTIL I FEEL BETTER?

This is the question most often asked. The time is different for everyone. The experience of grief can occur for several months or even years after the death of someone we love.

Around 6 to 8 weeks after the death, you may feel you are getting worse. This could be when the initial numbness is starting to wear off or when there is a lack of support from others. This could also be a time when people around you are saying that it is time to “let go” or “move on”. All these reasons could lead you to feel a sense of confusion and intense emotional distress. Sometimes the pain can even feel unbearable at this point.

Our understanding of grief suggests that grief is an experience that is neither always fully present nor finally absent as you go through a continuous process of adaptation and change. The loss may continue to carry some form of sadness but the emotional intensity may lessen across time. It can be healthy to continue remembering the person.

The first anniversary of the death can also be a challenging time for many. Special occasions, such as birthdays and celebratory seasons can also be particularly difficult, especially in the first year. It is natural that grief is more intense at these times and it can feel as though the various old feelings of grief are coming back.

WHAT HELPS?

Grief is a very individual process and we each react differently to loss. There is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to grieve and the process may be gradual. We take time to establish a relationship with someone we care about, so our adjustment to the death also takes time. The goal is not about coming to a point where we “let go” or “move on”. Instead it is more useful to see grief as an ongoing process of adjusting to the life changes while still continuing to make space to remember the person in your life.

In coping with grief, you are likely to engage in two types of experiences. Firstly, there are the experiences of the emotional loss (e.g. feelings of sadness, a deep sense of yearning, anxiety about the future, remembering memories from the past). Secondly, there are the experiences of adapting to the changes or re-orientating your life to accommodate the changes (e.g. attending to responsibilities associated with the death, going back to university or work, attending to practical day-to-day matters).

A helpful way of approaching grief is to continuously move between these two types of experiences. That is, having the time and space to experience the feelings of loss while also making time to manage the practical matters of adjusting to the changes resulting from the death. The ability to move between these two processes is like the swing of the pendulum that goes from one side to the other, which is normal and adaptive. As time goes by, the total amount of time spent on both these experiences will lessen.

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<tr>
<th>EXPERIENCE OF LOSS</th>
<th>EXPERIENCE OF RESTORATION</th>
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<td>Memories from the past</td>
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<td>Deep sense of yearning</td>
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<td>Emotional focus</td>
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<td>Not directly adapting to changes in daily life</td>
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At different points in time, you will notice that you are more inclined towards one side of the pendulum swing. It is useful to remember that adaptive coping in grief involves flexibly moving between these two types of experiences. If you notice that your experiences are focused only on one side of the grief experience, it can be useful to think of ways to increase the experience on the other side of the pendulum swing.

Some strategies to help with experiencing the emotions of loss include:

- **Participating in a “rite of passage”** to help say goodbye – a funeral or other ritual that is meaningful for you. This can be as elaborate or as simple as is appropriate to you.
- **Writing** a journal or poetry to record thoughts and feelings. You can write to friends and family as a way of telling your story and expressing your feelings. You can also write to the person you have lost as a way of telling them what you would want them to know.
- **Reading** about the experiences of loss that others have gone through. There is some comfort in connecting with others who have gone through a similar journey. Some examples include in the above video.
- **Spending time alone** to remember, pray, meditate, cry and mourn. Lighting a candle or listening to music also helps create space for reflection.
- **Keeping and enjoying treasures** like good memories, photos and mementos. It could be useful to go through meaningful items as a way of feeling more connected to the shared memories.
- **Visiting** places that are meaningful to your relationship and connecting with the memories you have.
- **Talking** to a trusted other(s) who will listen with understanding to your thoughts and feelings. It is also useful to arrange for additional support during important dates, such as anniversaries.

Some strategies to help with the experiences of restoration include:

- **Eating** a healthy diet, frequent small amounts of nutritious, easily digested food. This is about ensuring that you get enough nutrients essential for maintaining good health and wellbeing. See our Learn To module on “Eat Healthily” for some additional resources on healthy eating.
- **Exercising** if you can – it helps manage stress and excess adrenalin. You can try having a walk for fresh air, which also gives you some healing space.
- **Getting enough rest.** While staying active is important, having proper rest is equally important to enable you to cope with the changes resulting from the loss. You can have a look at the above video and information to improve sleep quality.
- **Finding distractions** to provide some “time out” from the pain. Some ideas might include going out with friends, listening to uplifting music, visiting new places. When you feel vulnerable and sad avoid choosing distractions that can lead to feeling worse – like excessive alcohol or pills.
- **Prioritising daily tasks.** Do only what is essential. Be patient with yourself. You may find it harder than usual to concentrate – taking frequent breaks and studying in shorter periods with clear and conservative goals for each session.
- **Using systematic problem-solving.** Systematically working through a problem can be much more effective than abstractly thinking it through in your head. These steps are: (1) identify the issue, (2) set the goals you want to achieve, (3) brainstorm ideas, (4) select the best solution, (5) implement then (6) evaluate your solution. Here’s an article that guides you through these steps.
- **Having a health check** as part of your self-care. You can contact the University Health Services for an appointment with a doctor.
– Remaining active and connected. Staying active not only helps to stay physically, psychologically and emotionally healthy but also increases opportunities to connect with your community. Find ways to connect with your social network or become part of a group or community that shares the same values and interests as you.

Most people going through grief will eventually be able to adjust to the loss and be able to continue remembering the person without being overwhelmed by the sense of loss. So, allow yourself to grieve in whatever way that is comfortable for you. Take time to reflect on the memories of the person or engage in certain rituals that are meaningful for you. It is useful to allow space to remember, pray, meditate, cry and mourn. Also take time to care for yourself, allow some time away from the painful feelings and attend to the day-to-day responsibilities that you have. It is important to maintain a healthy diet and some physical activity during this time. The key to adaptive coping is maintaining a balance between all these different activities.

Grieving is a very personal experience and what is required for each individual is different. However, having supportive people around you can be useful in coping with the experiences of grief.

Sometimes those around you may feel uncomfortable relating to you during this time. Some may distance themselves or are unsure what to say, which can be hurtful experiences for you. This often comes from a sense of helplessness they feel because they do not know the best way to support you. Therefore, it can be useful to communicate with family, friends and colleagues about your needs so that they can best support and comfort you. This can be telling them to spend some quiet time with you or helping you with the day-to-day matters.

If you are supporting others who are grieving, it may be useful to look at the websites of the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement and Helpguide for ways to support others who are grieving.

WHAT SUPPORT IS USEFUL FROM OTHERS?

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IS COUNSELLING OR PSYCHOLOGICAL THERAPY USEFUL?

You may be able to talk about how you feel or share stories and memories with friends or family members. Sometimes it can also be easier not to talk but just to have company. Family and friends can provide valuable support, however, for some who are grieving it can also be helpful to talk to someone outside of your usual network of support, such as a counsellor or a psychologist. These trained professionals can support you to safely explore grief and connect with feelings and memories. They can also help you work through the range of different challenges that may arise in the process of grieving. If you wish to speak to a psychologist, you can contact The University of Sydney Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) for an appointment:

T 8627 8433 or 8627 8437