

Grief. *What is it?*

Grief... What is it? What can I expect? What is normal?

"My loved one has just died. I know I am supposed to grieve. What does that mean? Should it be over in a month or two, or could it take years? Am I crazy if I break out in tears for no reason? Am I normal if I am not overwhelmed or devastated?"

All are common questions. The answers are as simple as they are complex.

Grief is a reaction to loss, often associated with death, but it can be engendered by any loss or change (e.g. divorce, move, job ending, even life transitions).

It can be expressed in a variety of ways: emotionally, often in sadness, fear, guilt or anger; physically, in increased pain or illness, in sleeping or eating disturbances; mentally, in uncontrollable or obsessive thoughts or questions about beliefs or spirituality; behaviorally, in withdrawal from others or excessive dependency, sometimes in either hyper-overwork or the inability to complete even the simplest tasks of daily living.

Everyone does it differently. There is no right or wrong way. It varies in intensity, duration and form depending on a number of factors. It tends to be more severe and longer lasting if the loss was sudden, violent, or unexpected; if it involved someone (thing) very close or a relationship of considerable dependency; if it involved conflict or pain; if the bereaved has limited social support or resources; if he or she had had many losses or problems prior to this one.

Many people experience grief as "coming in waves" and having phases.


The first phase is often described as the SHOCK or IMPACT phase. It is characterized by a numbness, a sense of unreality. The bereaved can feel anesthetized, that the loss didn't occur. He or she can "move through a fog", feel totally overwhelmed and unable to cope, or feel "nothing". There are usually many decisions to make, many people around, and much busyness to distract and keep the grief "at bay".

After a few weeks or months, the initial reaction usually evolves into the SUFFERING or RECOIL phase. Business and arrangements are completed, others get back to their own lives, and the griever comes to understand the significance of his/her loss. There is frequently an emotional upheaval, often called the "roller coaster of grief". He/she can experience wide mood swings, depression with anxiety, hostility and/or fatigue, and sometimes guilt: "I should have..." He/she can dream wildly or not at all, hallucinate – actually see the deceased, and develop problems

with eating, sleeping and even addiction. Physical symptoms are not uncommon; the immune system seems less effective. Sometimes there is little recoil. There may even be a profound sense of relief or freedom.

Sometimes the reaction is severe enough to prevent the griever from going about the necessary tasks of daily living and may require medical and/or psychological help. Often, talking about the feelings with a friend, spiritual advisor, grief counselor or support group can make a big difference in helping the bereaved to feel "normal", less alone and more able to handle the suffering.

Finally, after months, a year or two or even many years, the third phase of ACCOMMODATION or ACCEPTANCE is reached. The ups and downs have leveled out. Life goes on as the griever finds new sense of direction and purpose and new energy. Life will never be the same, the loss will never be forgotten and holidays or anniversaries may long continue to trigger strong reactions; but the griever finally knows that he/she will survive, be okay and even happy.

This, then, is grief. 

Some books that may help...

Colgrove, Bloomfield & McWilliams, *How to Survive the Loss of a Love*

Frankl, V., *Man's Search for Meaning*

Grollman, E., *Straight Talk about Death for Teenagers*

Klein, A., *The Healing Power of Humor*

Kubler-Ross, E., *On Death and Dying*

Kushner, H., *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*

O'Toole, D., *Aarvy Aardvark Finds Hope*

Rando, T., *Grieving: How to Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies*

Rando, T., *Loss and Anticipatory Grief*

Schaefer & Lynons, *How Do We Tell the Children?*

Scheff, H., *The Bereaved Parent*

Tatelbaum, G., *You Don't Have to Suffer*