

# GRIEF AND LOSS

## When Someone Close Dies

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### **Introduction**

We all face numerous losses through our lives. It could be losing a job, losing a home, or ending a relationship. When the loss is the death of someone close to us, someone we care about – a family member, friend, neighbor, or colleague/coworker – the loss can trigger a grieving process that can affect our way of living, both at home and at work/school.

This section is here to help you better understand and cope when someone close to you dies. This is also a guide on ways to balance your own personal needs to heal and recover with the potential demands and expectations of being at work or at school.

There may be times when it is appropriate to offer Cause of Death education to campus members following a campus death. This will be helpful to furthering their understanding of the cause of death in cases of suicide or communicable disease.

Education also may be useful when death is due to alcohol or drug use, violence, a motor vehicle accident, natural disaster or in a multiple death situation.

### **I. The Grieving Process**

Grief is a natural, normal response to loss. Although grieving the death of someone is a normal reaction, at times grief can feel enormously painful, overwhelming, and exhausting. Beginning to understand your grieving experience, and taking gradual steps to address your pain and loss, can be important and integral components of recovering from your grief.

### **II. Stages of Grief**

Within the first few weeks to months after a death, you may find yourself riding on a roller coaster of shifting emotions. Most people go through these stages not in linear steps, but in unpredictable waves—moving through one stage to the next and sometimes shifting back. Some people will also experience certain phases but not others. Here are several common, typical grief reactions:

- **SHOCK/DISBELIEF**  
This is the numbing, disorienting sense that the death has not really happened, not really occurred. This reaction can be intensified and complicated if the death is sudden, violent, or unanticipated. Your mind may be telling you “there must be some mistake,” or “this can’t be true.” These symptoms typically last from several hours to several days.
- **ANGER**  
Your anger may be targeted at a number of sources. You may feel waves of anger at the doctors who treated your loved one, anger at your family members for not rallying together, anger at God over what seems senseless or unjust, even anger at yourself or the person who died and “left” you.
- **GUILT**  
You may blame yourself for not doing more, not being there enough, or not being there when the death happened. You may feel regret over “unfinished business” – conflicts you and the deceased never resolved, or feelings between the two of you that were never fully discussed or shared.
- **SADNESS**  
You may experience a deep sense of loss. There may be moments when you find yourself at a loss for words, weeping, or bursting uncontrollably into tears.
- **FEAR**  
There may be anxiety or panic; fears about carrying on, fears about the future. If the person who died was an adult (partner, sibling, parent), it may bring up fears about your own sense of mortality or sense of being left behind.
- **DEPRESSION**  
You may go through periods of melancholy, or “blueness,” where you feel inclined to withdraw or isolate yourself. You may lose interest in your usual activities, or feel helpless or hopeless.

In addition to these stages, people who are grieving frequently experience physical symptoms, such as fatigue, sleep disruption, appetite changes, increased tension and numerous aches and pains. Grief can also affect you on a psychological level. Some of these common signs include feeling distracted, forgetful, irritable, disoriented, or confused.

### **III. Tasks of Mourning**

In healthy grieving, the tasks of mourning and completing one’s grief come in several stages. The first is to accept and fully experience your loss, including feeling and expressing your pain and sorrow. Second, is to let go of your attachment to your loved one and your accompanying grief. Third, is to start to form new relationships or attachments in your life. This third phase is where you feel you are moving through

your healing and recovery, and can start to develop new commitments and ties to people and activities.

#### **IV. What You Need During Grief**

Grieving the death of someone does not have a particular timetable. Mourning your loss may take weeks, months, or even years. For many individuals, the death of their loved one is carried with them throughout their lives. Although there is no “cure” for grief, here are several ways to help you cope with your loss and begin to ease the pain.

- **TIME**

Take time alone and time with others whom you trust and who will listen when you need to talk.

- **CARING**

Try to allow yourself to accept the expressions of caring from others even though they may be awkward. Helping a friend or relative suffering the same loss may bring a feeling of closeness with that person.

- **REST, RELAXATION, EXERCISE, DIVERSION**

You may need to give yourself extra amounts of things that nourish and replenish you. Hot baths, afternoon naps, a short trip, a project helping others – any of these may give you a lift. Grief can be an emotionally and physically exhausting process.

- **GOALS**

For a while, it will seem that much of life is without meaning. At times like these, small goals are helpful. Something to look forward to – like lunch with a friend that day, a movie the next week, a trip next month – helps you get through the time in the immediate future. Sometimes living moment by moment, or one day at a time, is the rule of thumb. As time passes, you may want to work on longer range goals to give yourself some structure and direction to your life.

- **SECURITY**

Try to reduce or find help for financial and other stresses in your life. Allow yourself to be close and open up to those you trust. Developing or getting back into a routine helps. Focus on doing things at your own pace.

- **PERMISSION TO BACKSLIDE**

Sometimes after a period of feeling better, you find yourself back in the old feelings of extreme sadness, despair, or anger. This is the nature of grief – one moment you’re up, and next, you’re down. Sometimes when you backslide, you are simply remembering, re-experiencing the trauma or enormity of your loss which starts to flood back and overwhelm you.

- **HOPE**

You may find hope and comfort from those who have experienced a similar loss. Knowing what helped them, and realizing that over time they have recovered, may give you the hope and strength to envision that you, too, will eventually heal from your grief.

- **SMALL PLEASURES**

So not underestimate the healing power of small pleasures. Sunsets, massage, a walk near the ocean, a favorite food – all are small steps toward giving to yourself and regaining your pleasure in life itself.

- **BE AWARE OF DRUG AND ALCOHOL USE**

The use of drugs, alcohol, and even prescription medications may prolong and delay the necessary process of grieving. You cannot prevent or cure grief. The only way out is through the grief process.

- **PERMISSION TO CHANGE YOUR MIND**

Grieving can shake you up inside. You may have difficulty concentrating; or find yourself constantly reevaluating your priorities. You may be unsure of uncertain what you want in numerous aspects of your life. When you make commitments or plans, be sure to let people know you may need room to cancel or change your mind.

- **BE PREPARED AROUND HOLIDAYS AND ANNIVERSARIES**

For many people, holidays, birthdays, or the anniversary of their loved one's death can bring up painful memories or revive feelings of longing and sadness over their loss – even for those who believe they have “finished” their grieving and moved on. This “anniversary” reaction is a common part of the grieving process, but you may be still surprised by the flood of emotions that may be reactivated during this period. You might want to be especially aware and gentle with yourself around this time. You may also want to allow more private time for yourself, or arrange to spend more time around family and others close to you.

In many instances, people can move through their grief on their own, or with their existing supports and resources. However, sometimes you need outside help or assistance to keep yourself from “going under,” or getting “perpetually stuck” in your grief. These conditions can happen especially if you are experiencing multiple stressors, or coping with cumulative grief. These warning signs include continuing bouts of depression, social withdrawal and isolation, suicidal thoughts, or continuing feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and despair.

## **V. Grief and Work**

Work is a place where you spend a considerable amount of time in your life. When someone close to you dies, not only do you have to cope with this loss, but you must also adjust to working or returning to work after the death. The early weeks or months

may be especially difficult. Here are some suggestions to help you through this emotional transition.

- **BE EASY ON YOURSELF**

Expect that you may feel more distracted or less productive than before your loss. Realize your mind or reflexes may not respond as quickly in the beginning.

- **TAKE TIME OUT TO GRIEVE**

Try to set time aside during the day or create ways to remember your loved one. Let people know if you need moments of more privacy or need a place to cry or compose yourself while at work.

- **CONSIDER HOW MUCH YOU WANT TO SHARE WITH OTHERS**

For some people, sharing some of their grief and sorrow with their coworkers help them cope; while for others, seeking other avenues for solace and comfort works best for them. If you choose to share some of your grief with coworkers, select those with whom you feel the most comfortable, and who appear to be open to listening to you.

When you are grieving, it can also be difficult to gauge when or how much to share with people. Don't hesitate to ask your coworkers about their readiness or availability to listen ("Is it okay that I'm sharing this with you right now?" or "Please tell me if this is too much.") Be aware that if your feelings are particularly intense or emotional, or you seem to require a lot of attention, some coworkers may appear uncomfortable with your sharing. This may mean you need to find sources outside of work to express your sadness.

- **BE UNDERSTANDING WITH COWORKERS**

You may find coworkers awkward or unsure how to interact with you shortly after the death. Many coworkers are well-meaning and want to be supportive, but may feel uncertain how to approach you or may feel afraid of what to say (so they either say the "wrong thing" or say nothing at all). Let people know what level of interaction you'd like ("It's okay for you to ask how I'm doing..." or "I'd rather not discuss this right now; I'll let you know when I can..."). Respect people's limits of being able to attend to your loss while continuing to carry on with their work.

- Hospice of Eastern Maine  
Eastern Maine Healthcare Mall  
885 Union Street  
Suite 220  
Bangor, ME 04401  
(207) 973-8269  
<http://www.emh.org/hospice>
- Hospice of Maine  
519 Ocean Avenue  
Portland, ME 04103  
(207) 774-4417 or 800-303-9272  
<http://www.hospiceofmaine.org>
- The Center for Grieving Children  
Mailing Address: PO Box 1438, Portland, ME 04104  
Street Address: 49 York Street, Portland, ME 04101  
(207) 775-5216  
<http://www.cgcmaine.org>
- Bangor Area Visiting Nurses  
<http://www.emh.org/bavn>
- Aroostook Visiting Nurses  
<http://www.tamc.org/vna/services/avn.html>
- Portland Area Visiting Nurses  
<http://www.mercyhospital.com/patient/vnathomehealth/>
- Tender Living Care  
<http://www.cgcmaine.org/tlc.htm>
- Children's Services  
<http://www.chcs-me.org/child3.html>
- Portland Area Bereavement Resources  
<http://www.hospiceofmaine.org/grief.htm>