

Coping with Grief

People who have been affected by a death or other loss are likely to experience feelings of grief. Grief is a normal, appropriate emotional response to loss. As people grieve they may experience a variety of emotions including shock, sadness, depression, anxiety, hostility, guilt, fear, and, with time, acceptance. They may also move back and forth between good memories and bad memories. While the grieving process is difficult, there are things that can help people heal more quickly and integrate the loss into their lives in a positive way. Talking with trusted friends and family members about your memories, feelings, and thoughts will be helpful.

Keeping a daily routine will help you create a sense of stability as you reorganize your life and your worldview. It is also important to set aside time to do things that make you feel good. Eating regular meals, getting adequate sleep, and exercising can also be helpful. If your feelings of grief and loss are interfering with your ability to function in your daily life, you may want to consider receiving counseling.

Surviving Loss: 10 Suggestions

The loss of a loved one through death often requires adjustment in our way of looking at the world and our plans for living in it. It is a major disruption in our lives, and people's reactions differ. A positive self-image, an ability to relate easily, a faith to lean on and a willingness to take initiative are ways of being and interacting that can help people manage feelings of grief.

Grief therapist C.M. Parker suggests that the pain of grief is the price we have to pay for love. In a very real way, whenever we choose to love someone, we are also choosing to be hurt. The time comes when we have to say good-bye and let go. That is when our grief begins. As it takes time to love, so it also takes time to let go. People say, "Time heals." Yet time by itself doesn't heal. If a person in grief sits in a corner waiting for time to take care of bitter sorrow, time won't do anything. It is what we do with time that can heal.

Bereaved people may find themselves feeling stranded in their own grief. The following suggestions are ways we can use the time to rekindle hope and healing.

Take Time...

To Accept Death

Facing and accepting death remains a necessary condition for continuing our own life. Often it is hard to realize that what happened has really happened and that life has changed. We hope that it was all a bad dream. We hope that our loved one will call us from work or that we are going to hear that person's voice when we step into the house. The only way to deal with death, no matter how painful that might be, is to accept it, not fight it. Yes, our loved one has died. But that doesn't mean that we have to die, too. We have to pick up the pieces and go on from there.

To Let Go

One of the most difficult human experiences is letting go. Yet from birth to death life is a series of letting go - sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently. Letting go reminds us that we are not in control of life, and that we need to accept what we cannot control. Letting go means adjusting to a new reality in

which our loved one is no longer present. And yet, many bereaved continue to believe that their loved one has not really died, that life hasn't really changed. Letting go takes place when the "we" becomes "I," when we are able to substitute the memories of the deceased for their physical presence and when we are able to change patterns in our lives and in our environment. Letting go occurs when we are able to endure and accept the feelings that accompany death.

To Make Decisions

People who have been very dependent on the deceased find themselves lost in the world. They are afraid to give themselves direction, to make mistakes, to ask, to try. Yet making mistakes is the way in which we learn and develop trust in ourselves. We need to be patient with ourselves as we gradually learn to make decisions.

To Share

The greatest need of the bereaved is to have someone to share their pain, their memories and their sadness. In life, we can only accept that which we can share. Bereaved people need others to give them time and space to grieve. When you are grieving, you might need someone who looks backward, because the past, not the future, remains the source of comfort in the early stages of grief. Sharing our memories and feelings with people who are grieving themselves is especially helpful and therapeutic.

To Believe

To survive is to find meaning in suffering. Suffering that has meaning to it is endurable. However, meaning doesn't just happen. At times, our grief can shake up our faith. For many people, religion-- with its rituals, the promise of an afterlife and its community support--offers a comforting and strengthening base in the lonely encounter with helplessness and hopelessness. Our faith does not take away our grief but helps us live with it.

To Forgive

The feeling of guilt and the need for forgiveness accompany many of our experiences, especially those that have remained unfinished. We might feel guilty about what we did or didn't do, about the clues we missed, about the things we said or failed to say. As we review our lives and our relationship with the deceased, there will always be things which are less than ideal. We need to accept our imperfections and make peace with ourselves.

We cannot judge our yesterdays with the knowledge of today. So torturing ourselves for the things we did and wished we hadn't done, or dwelling on the things we didn't do, doesn't change anything. It only makes us miserable. We certainly need to own and express our anger, but there is also a need for forgiveness.

To Feel Good

Bereaved people are not sentenced to unhappiness. We are not born happy or unhappy. We learn to be happy by the way we adjust to life-crises and use the opportunities life gives us. We need to be patient and give ourselves time to learn and time to make mistakes. We especially need to affirm ourselves and pat ourselves on the back for every small thing we learn to do, for this is when we "expand" ourselves.

The death of a loved one affects our life-style and changes our self-image. Grief can rapidly shape us and help us discover a new independence and outlook on things.

To Make New Friends

Loneliness will be present in grief, and it might be nature's way of mending our broken hearts. Loneliness can also be transformed into solitude. That happens when we are not oppressed by our loneliness, but learn to live creatively with it by cultivating our inner resources and self-understanding. In the grief process, healing occurs when we take the step to move out of our safe boundaries and interact with others. Old friends might be there to offer security and comfort; new friends will be there to offer opportunities. We might meet these new people through a support group, a card club, or at a class. We need friends on the road to recovery.

To Laugh

In life there are as many reasons to laugh as there are to cry. In grief there is a time when our tears come with less frequency and intensity, and we learn to remember without crying. Laughter, on the other hand, helps us survive, and it helps us reenter life. Laughter helps us accept our limitations and develops hope in the present. Laughter defines our movement from helplessness to hopefulness.

To Give

A way to overcome our loneliness and pain is to be concerned about the loneliness and pain of others. People turn away from grief when they feel wanted and needed by the living. Being able to help someone gives us meaning. So if we find someone else who needs us it can be an opportunity for our own healing. Getting involved with others gives us the feeling that life goes on and takes us away from self-pity. Listening to someone, empathizing and sharing over the telephone, providing information or going out to lunch together are ways to give of yourself.

There is a tremendous wisdom that is accumulated in one's encounter with grief, and it needs to be shared. Healing takes place when we turn our pain into a positive experience, and we realize that helping others is the key to helping ourselves. The road to recovery from grief, therefore, is to take time to do things which will enable us to give a renewed meaning to our lives. In grief, no one can take away our pain because no one can take away our love. The call of life is to learn to love...again.