

Bereavement and Loss

Grieving is a natural process we go through in response to losses of many kinds, e.g. death, loss of a job, relationship breakdown, life events and changes. When we are in the midst of grief, we can feel that it will never end, and that we will always feel as we do now.

The loss of someone who is significant to you, through death, but also through separation, may be one of the hardest things you will experience in your life.

Other losses such as the loss of a job, loss of good health or major life changes can often cause many of the same symptoms of grief. It is important to recognise how these life events affect us and accept that we may need to grieve for them too. Much of what is written here will apply to any loss, not only loss through death.

People respond differently to loss, and often individuals can feel very alone in dealing with the intense personal emotions they may be experiencing. They may wonder if what they are feeling and experiencing following their loss is 'ok', to be expected. They might not even realise that their feelings are their own grief response.

Grief takes time to work through. There are no hard and fast guidelines or set timeframe. It takes as long as it takes, but as a general rule it will take longer than you expect. It is important not to try to 'get over it' too quickly; not to adopt a 'stiff upper lip' attitude. Grief is an inevitable, normal, and human response to loss. We may not seem to grieve much immediately, but may find that weeks, months or even years later feel upset and painfully aware of our loss.

Bereavement

Experiences of bereavement and loss are entirely individual. No one can tell you how you will feel. Everyone grieves in their own unique way. Even people experiencing the same loss may grieve in different ways from each other, and this can be hard to accept. Some wish to mourn in a way that celebrates the life of the deceased; others make a great and visible show of their grief. Some people are very low key in their response to death, marking it with a funeral and perhaps a gathering afterwards, but with no recognised period of mourning and often no great show of feeling. Most cultures have their own particular way of marking bereavement. These may dictate the rituals surrounding the funeral and period afterwards which can both help and hinder the individual's experience of grief.

Symptoms of normal grief

There are some generally accepted and recognised reactions to loss. You may feel:

- Numb, as if paralysed
- Unable to believe the person is dead
- Angry about what has happened
- An enormous sense of unfairness
- Cry uncontrollably and unable to function as normal
- Guilty about surviving, about not having said goodbye; about leaving things unresolved
- An aching void, a sense of emptiness, which you feel will never be filled again. You may have fantasies about joining the deceased.

Whether the loss is expected or not, you may feel traumatised, but especially so in the case of a death which has been in any way violent such as through an accident, suicide or murder

When we grieve we experience a whole spectrum of emotions that can leave us feeling worn out, exhausted and confused.

The reaction of others

You will be aware that people around you will react in very different ways to your grief.

There will be those who very much want to help in practical ways, or by giving you emotional support. It is up to you to guide them as to how they may best help you; whether you need a listening ear, or maybe need to be left alone for a while. Remember, they can't know what will help unless you tell them. Don't be afraid to take up offers of help; it is not a sign of weakness to lean on someone when you need support.

There will be other people who are unable to cope with your grief; they may not be able to talk about the death or your loss or even to acknowledge it. Sometimes people who are grieving are told they 'should be getting over it' or what to do in order to 'get back to normal'. This may be because it raises difficult feelings in them, or because they feel inadequate and don't know what to say to you. This can seem hurtful if you don't understand what may be behind this seemingly insensitive behaviour.

How can you support yourself?

Here are some suggestions which you may find helpful:

- Recognise that mourning takes time and you cannot hurry it along.
- If you feel like crying, then do it. If you don't want to cry in front of others, find a place where you do feel able to express your emotions safely.
- Don't be afraid to accept whatever help you're offered by friends, relatives, religious leaders etc.
- If you need to talk about what you have lost, even if you need to do so over and over again, allow yourself to do this until the need lessens.

- If you're worried about over-using friends or relatives, consider talking to a Student Counsellor or other professional helper.
- Looking after yourself is something easily forgotten when grieving, but doing something to feel better is especially important. Grief is tiring and a major stressor, so take time to relax.

Think about practical ways of doing something to ease your pain. Would it help to write a letter to the deceased saying what you perhaps didn't manage to say in their lifetime? Would you like to plant a tree or grow a plant in their memory and watch it blossom? Could you light a candle or create a ritual for special days?

The first anniversary of a loss is an important milestone and can be particularly difficult. Subsequent birthdays and anniversaries can be poignant reminders of your loss, and you may need to find your own way of dealing with such times by either marking them as special commemorative events or by ensuring you distract yourself while time passes.

And later . . .

The pain gradually lessens. It does happen even though you think it never will. But while we may never forget the loss, eventually we are able to pick up the threads of our lives.

But with that might come guilt and worry about forgetting or letting go of what we have lost. Along the years, although the pain lessens, the memories will never leave you as the loss finds its place in your history and experience. The more easily you can accept the need to grieve, the more comfortably it will rest. And it is right that we move through grieving, to a point where we can re-invest in the new landscape of our lives.

Additional Resources

You may also like to look at this website which gives further information and support on the theme of bereavement: www.cruse.org.uk. Cruse Bereavement Care is a national charity for bereaved people. They offer support, advice and information to children, young people and adults when someone dies. Cruse offers face-to-face, telephone, email and website support. They have a Freephone national helpline (0808 808 1677), local services, and a website (hopeagain.org.uk) specifically for young people. Their services are provided by a network of 5,000 trained volunteers and are confidential and free.

If you would like support through this time then contact the Student Counselling and Mental Health Services - email cmh@worc.ac.uk or phone 01905 54 2832. The Services' web page (www.worc.ac.uk/counselling) gives more information and tells you how to make an appointment.

The Student Counselling and Mental Health Service is located in Woodbury Building on the St John's Campus.