

Healthy Grieving

Student Counseling

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Common Grief Loss Responses*

Emotional

- Irritability/ mood swings
- Shock (if sudden loss)
- Blame
- Guilt
- Terror
- Intense sadness
- Emotional numbing
- Helplessness
- Loss of pleasure
- Depression

Cognitive Reactions

- Impaired concentration
- Impaired decision making
- Memory impairment
- Disbelief
- Confusion
- Nightmares
- Decreased self-esteem
- Intrusive thoughts/memories
- Worry
- Dissociation

Physical Reactions

- Fatigue or exhaustion
- Insomnia
- Hyper-arousal
- Depressed immunity
- Somatic responses (headaches, nausea)
- Decreased appetite
- Cardiovascular strain
- Startle response
- Tense muscles
- Increased suicidal risks

Interpersonal Reactions

- Relational strife
- Reduced intimacy
- Social withdrawal
- Distrust
- Vulnerability
- Impaired work/school performance
- Externalization of blame
- Decreased satisfaction
- Anger outbursts
- Isolating from others

*According to U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Responses to grief vary widely. While some individuals may cry, others mourn quietly. There is no timeline for grief! It is a myth that grief has “closure.”

Grieving also occurs while a loved one is still living, but not physically or psychologically present, called ambiguous loss, as in the case of a loved one developing dementia or a loved one who is suddenly missing. The task of living with grief requires time, evaluation of one’s needs throughout the process, and developing hope for the future by tapping into new resources and activities.

“If there is a tomorrow when we’re not together . . . there is something you must remember. You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think. But the most important thing is, even if we’re apart . . . I’ll always be with you.”

—Winnie the Pooh.

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Goal of Healthy Grieving:

1. To accept the finality of the loss;
2. To acknowledge and express the full range of feelings we experience as a result of the loss;
3. To adjust to a life in which the lost person, object, or experience is absent;
4. To say goodbye, to ritualize our movement to a new peace with the loss.

Good friends, family members, or a counselor can all be helpful in doing this vital work. You can also do a good deal to help yourself.

Helping Yourself Through Grief

Active, healthy grieving requires balance: balancing the time you spend directly working on your grief with the time you spend coping with your day-to-day life; balancing the amount of time you spend with others with the time you spend alone; balancing seeking help from others with caring for yourself. Focusing too strongly on any single side of these pairings is getting off track.

Healthy grieving is an active process. It takes energy that will likely have to be temporarily withdrawn from the usual pursuits of your life. Treat yourself with the same care, tolerance, and affection you would extend to a valued friend in a similar situation.

- Go gently—take whatever time it needs, rather than giving yourself a deadline for when you should be “over it”
- Expect and accept some reduction in your usual efficiency and consistency
- Try to avoid taking on new responsibilities or making major life decisions for a time
- Accept help and support when offered
- Be particularly attentive to maintaining healthy eating and sleeping patterns
- Exercise moderately and regularly
- Keep a journal
- Read—there are many helpful books on grief. If grief is understood, it is easier to handle
- Plan, and allow yourself to enjoy GOOD TIMES without guilt. The goal is balance
- Carry or wear a linking object—a keepsake that symbolically reminds you of your loss. Anticipate the time in the future when you no longer need to carry this reminder and gently let it go
- Take a yoga class
- Tell those around you what helps you and what doesn't. Most people would like to help if they knew how
- See a counselor
- Get a massage regularly
- Set aside a specific private time daily to remember and experience whatever feelings arise with memories
- Choose your entertainment carefully—some movies, TV shows, or books can intensify already strong feelings
- Plan for ‘special days’ such as holidays or anniversaries. Emotions can be particularly intense at these times
- Pray
- Connect on the internet. There are many resources for people in grief, as well as opportunities to chat with fellow grievers
- Vent your anger in healthy ways, rather than holding it in. A brisk walk or a game of tennis can help
- Speak to a spiritual leader
- Plant yourself in nature
- Do something to help someone else
- Write down your lessons. Healthy grieving will have much to teach you