

Grief — A Human Experience

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Like stress, grief is a part of everyone's life, but it seems to happen more often when a person gets older. Grief can be caused by any loss. It often occurs when someone special dies, when a job is lost, when changes cause a loss of independence, or when a relationship is lost due to conflict, separation or divorce. Grief seems to happen more often when people are older, largely because the elderly face the death of parents, aunts and uncles, siblings, friends their own age, and their partner, and they must face their own mortality. In addition to the death of loved ones, they often face the loss of independence, due in part to failing health, including eyesight and hearing. People respond to grief physically and emotionally, as well as spiritually.

Some common responses to grief are:

Physical symptoms. Trouble sleeping or breathing, lack of energy or restlessness, changes in eating habits, minor or more serious illnesses.

Disbelief: Denying the pain of what has happened, becoming numb or having emotional shock.

Anger or frustration. Not being able to stop the loss or change the situation, may include blaming others or a higher power.

Guilt. Enough was not done, the right thing was not said, or a conflict was not resolved.

Sadness. Feeling a deep sense of loss.

Anxiety or panic: Anxious about the future or the feelings being experienced.

Depression: Wanting to withdraw from others; feeling isolated, helpless, hopeless, or that no one can help.

Relief: Sense of freedom or relief from the burdens if the loss was anticipated and suffering had occurred, such as after a long struggle with an illness or dementia. Feelings of relief may cause feelings of guilt.

Dreams: These may be about the lost person or things and may be comforting or upsetting, and often explain some of the dreamers' feelings or cause more confusion.

Accepting the reality of the loss takes time, even if the loss was expected. Some people say that feeling the pain is the hardest part of the healing process. Both tears and

laughter can help. It is important to find ways to release the many different feelings such as sorrow, anger and fear. Trusted family and friends, a support group, trained religious leaders, and counselors are possible sources of support. People who do not allow time to grieve, stay too busy to think about the loss, or cut off feelings (perhaps with alcohol or tranquilizers) are at a risk for developing depression and physical illnesses.

Depression is different than grief. In many respects depression is a greater problem, yet treatable. Depression is a depressed or irritated mood that goes past a temporary state and interferes with living for more than several weeks. A depressed person may not always be sad but will often have a persistent sad, anxious, empty mood. The depressed person may not have a recognizable loss or the loss may seem like a punishment. The person may be irritable or unable to express anger. People who are depressed may feel hopeless and have uncontrolled weeping or be unable to cry. They may have insomnia or excessive sleeping, have a preoccupation with self, and possible thoughts of suicide. They may not accept support, may tend to feel isolated (may actually be isolated), and may not feel much joy or pleasure.

If someone you care about has several of these symptoms, you will want to help that person get professional assistance. People suffering with grief are often treated for depression even if they are only experiencing the stages of grief. However, not treating a depressed person, even if there are no outward signs of depression, can be detrimental to an individual's long-term health and wellness.

Being a Support to Those Who Are Grieving

Do your best to be a friend to a grieving person or a depressed person. Too often when people are suffering, especially with depression, others tend to get irritated with them and fail to be supportive. Do your best as a friend, family member, neighbor, coworker, or professional to help others through grief. Give them "permission" to grieve. If the grief does not appear manageable, encourage professional assistance. There are times in life when one needs to rely on others to help. Those who are suffering severe grief or depression may be unable to ask for help and may need your help to access resources. Getting involved in someone else's

life is risky because of the fear of doing or saying something wrong or that may offend others. However, your support, assistance, involvement, friendship, caring, love and mere presence are needed during periods of grief. When you care about someone, you can help where you have strengths and then let others help when necessary.

Some Tips for Dealing with Grief

- Take care of yourself: Eat well, exercise and get enough sleep.
- Talk regularly with friends. Tell them what helps you and what doesn't help.
- Structure your time alone.
- Record your feelings by writing or drawing in a journal.
- Talk about your feelings with someone you trust.
- Do something that requires you to use your hands in repetitive motions.
- Spend time alone in nature, meditation, or prayer.
- Invite someone to be your telephone buddy. Talk daily.
- Do something to help someone else. Volunteer for something.
- Give yourself rewards.
- Change something in your home.
- Allow yourself to laugh.
- Allow yourself to cry.

The grieving process is more socially acceptable than suffering depression. Because grief can easily turn into depression, it is important to watch for the pervasive feelings of sadness, hopelessness or chronic feelings of emptiness. If you or someone you know may be suffering extreme grief or depression, please seek assistance.

If You or Someone You Know Needs Help, Please Call:

National Mental Health Association (NMHA),
1-800-969-NMHA;

National Association for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) Helpline,
1-800-950-6264;

The Center for Mental Health Services Information Line,
1-800-780-CMHS; or Nebraska Mental Health,
(402) 479-5126;

Nebraska Mental Health Consumer Help Line,
1-800-836-7660;

Nebraska State Department of Aging, **(402) 471-4617;**

or your local mental health office or community services.

References

A Mental Health Guide for Older Kansans and Their Families, 2000. Nebraska Mental Health, Substance Abuse and Gambling Services, 2000.

Panhandle Mental Health Services, Scottsbluff, Neb., 2002.

Panhandle Community Services, Scottsbluff, Neb., 2002.

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