

Coping with Bereavement

The natural process of grieving

Bereavement is a distressing experience that all of us encounter at sometime in our lives. Yet it is something that is talked about very little in our everyday life. This being the case, we only have a limited opportunity to learn about how to cope with loss. Grieving is a natural process that can take place after any kind of loss. When a loved one passes away this can be a very overpowering emotion that has to run its course. There is whole succession of different feelings that can take some time to go through and must not be hurried. Although people are all individuals, the order in which they go through these feelings are very similar.

For some hours or days following the death of someone who is close, most people feel totally stunned. A feeling of disbelief is common, even if the death has been expected (say after a long period of illness), however this feeling of emotional numbness can actually help in dealing with the various practical arrangements that have to be made. However, this detachment from reality can become a problem if it goes on for too long.

Sometimes it is not until the actual funeral that the reality of what has happened finally sinks in. Although it may be distressing to attend the funeral, it is important to say goodbye to somebody we loved. It is often the case for people who did not do this to experience a great feeling of regret for years.

After the feeling of numbness has gone it is often replaced by a sense of agitation and a yearning for the person who has died. This can affect the bereaved in their everyday life, it may be difficult to relax, concentrate or even sleep properly. Some people experience extremely disturbing dreams, others say that they actually see their loved one everywhere they go, more commonly in the places that they used to spend time together. It is also quite usual to feel angry at this time – towards doctors and medical staff for not preventing the death, towards people around them such as friends and relatives, or even towards the person who has left them.

Another very common feeling is guilt. It is likely that the bereaved will go over in their mind all the things they wished that they had said or done, in some cases they may even consider what they could have done to have prevented the death. Of course, death is usually beyond the control of anyone, and they must be reminded of this.

Guilt is often experienced if a sense of relief is felt when someone has died, particularly after a distressing illness. This feeling of relief is perfectly natural and very common and is nothing to feel guilty about.

These strong, confusing emotions can be felt for quite a while after the death and are generally followed by periods of sadness and depression.

Grief can be sparked off, many months after a death, by things that bring back memories. It can be difficult for other people to understand or cope with someone who bursts into tears for no apparent reason. Some people who can't deal with this tend to stay away at a time when they are needed most of all.

It is best to return to normal life as soon as possible, and to resume normal activities. The phrase 'time is a great healer' is, in most cases, certainly true, however the pain of losing a loved one never entirely disappears, nor should it be expected to.

For the bereaved partner there are constant reminders of their singleness – seeing other couples together and from the images on television of happy families. All of this can make it difficult to adjust to a new single, lifestyle.

The different stages of mourning tend to overlap and can show themselves in various ways. There is no 'standard' way of grieving as we, being individuals, have our own ways of dealing with all of life's trials not least the loss of someone we love.

Grief in children

Generally children do not understand the meaning of death until they are three or four years old. Even with this being the case they feel the loss of a close friend or relative in much the same way as adults. Even in infancy it is clear that children grieve and feel great distress.

Children experience the passage of time differently to adults and can therefore appear to overcome grief quite quickly. However, children in their early school years may need reassuring that they are not responsible for the death of a close relative as they often blame themselves for one reason or another.

It is often important that the grief of a young person is not overlooked, as they will often not want to burden parents by talking about their feelings. For this reason they should usually be included in the funeral arrangements.

The healing process

Generally friends and relatives can help by simply spending time with the person who has been bereaved. Being close to others can be a great source of comfort. It is not always necessary to say anything; just being there is enough. It is important that a bereaved person is able to talk and cry with someone without being told to pull themselves together.

It can also be difficult for people to understand why the bereaved keep covering the same ground, talking and apparently becoming distressed about the same things over and over again, this is an important part of the healing process and should really be encouraged. Not mentioning the name of the person who has died for fear of upsetting the bereaved can lead to a sense of isolation and can, in fact, add to the grief.

Another difficult time when friends and relatives can be of help is festive occasions and anniversaries, which can be particularly painful for years to come. Practical help with domestic chores and looking after children can all lead to easing the difficulties facing the bereaved. Elderly bereaved partners may need more practical help than most, particularly with financial arrangements – paying bills etc.

Some people hardly seem to grieve at all. They can avoid any mention of their loss, do not cry at the funeral and appear to return to normal life remarkably quickly. For some people this is just their way of dealing with their loss and no harm occurs. However, others may suffer physical illness and periods of depression for some time to come.

Sometimes people get stuck in the grieving pattern. The sense of disbelief and shock can continue and never seem to end, whereas others cannot think about anything else but the loss of their loved one. In these circumstances, some form of help may be required. A list of care associations who can assist may be found on the Bereavement Services web pages.