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www.childbereavementuk.org

How we grieve

Few people go through life without experiencing the death of someone they love. Death is a part of life, and at some point we all face it. Through the process of grieving we learn how to cope with the future in spite of our loss. How well we manage this affects our quality of life and our ability to relate to others.

A hundred years ago, death was a big part of people's lives. There were mourning rituals and death was talked about more openly. This is still the case in some cultures. Bereaved families and individuals tell us that talking about death and the person who has died helps with their grief. The worst thing for them is people ignoring the death. Acknowledging the death, and finding ways of expressing painful feelings, can help in your grieving process.

The tasks of grieving and mourning

Research and the experience of bereaved individuals shows that grieving, the emotional process that takes place after someone significant dies, is very important. There is no set path or pattern to this process, as everyone grieves differently. However, most grieving people experience some or all of the following. The order of these is not set, as people usually move back and forth between these feelings.

Facing reality

Initially you are likely to be in a state of shock, even when a death has been anticipated. You may feel faint, cry uncontrollably, feel out of control or even collapse. Or you may be so numb that you display no emotion at all and appear very controlled, calm and detached. This initial numbness may last several days, and it can be a form of emotional protection which helps you to deal with all the necessary practicalities like coping with the funeral.

The more traumatic the loss, the more prolonged this numbness is likely to be. You may not want to accept what has happened and may cope by denying it or refusing to talk about it. However, it is important to find ways to gradually accept the death and the fact that the person can never return.

Viewing the body of the person who has died, getting involved in the preparations for the funeral and observing rituals and traditions may help you to face the reality of what has happened.



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Experiencing the pain of grief

Once the immediate feelings of shock settle, you may feel overwhelming grief for a long time after the death. Your grief may be so strong so that you are incapable of thinking about anything or anybody else but your loss and grief. You may find yourself getting upset or angry about things that you wouldn't normally.

A bereaved mother told us she felt that she 'had one layer of skin less' when she was describing how upset she got about things.

As well as feelings of extreme sadness, you may feel guilt, anger or resentment. Many people struggle with guilt or regret about some aspect of their relationship with the person who died. Perhaps you left your true feelings unsaid or said things you did not really mean. Some people feel they hadn't spent enough time with the person or really listened.

You may feel anger towards the person for leaving you to cope with life on your own, anger at the medical team for not curing the illness or not keeping them alive, or anger at God for letting it happen. In some cases, people can feel resentment towards a family member who they feel contributed in some way to the death.

Grief is not a mental illness, although sleeplessness, anxiety, fear, anger and being preoccupied with your emotions can all add up to a feeling of 'going mad'. These feelings are natural and, when acknowledged, can become less frequent over time. Expressing grief is healthy and attempts to avoid these feelings can cause problems in the future. If you feel you are suppressing your grief, or your anger or guilt continues for a long time or takes over from other feelings, you may want to consider seeking support from a trained professional.

Adjusting to the new reality

Facing life without someone important to you is a difficult and painful process. No one can fill the place they had in your life and each day can bring constant reminders of their absence. Just getting through the day can be a difficult task. The future may seem uncertain or even frightening. It can take many months before you are able to dwell less on the sad events surrounding the death and start to function more as you did before.

Maintaining connection and looking to the future

Reinvesting in the future involves continuing life without the person and starting to also focus on other things. It can feel like a betrayal and is perhaps the most difficult task of all. However, reinvesting in the future is not about forgetting. It is about finding ways of remembering and maintaining a connection with the person, in ways which comfort you and are important, but which fit in alongside other important things in your life. You can find suggestions for ways to remember the person in our information sheet 'Remembering'.

The sadness remains but becomes part of an adjusted life, and you can look to the future, while still recalling happy times spent with the person who has died and taking pleasure in those memories. You start to gain more control and life becomes more meaningful. You will find you are not as consumed by your grief but can choose when you want to reflect on your relationship with the person who died. It is natural at anniversaries or special occasions for feelings of grief to surface again and to be as vivid as on the day the person died.

For further resources, you may wish to visit Child Bereavement UK's website:

www.childbereavementuk.org