

Coping with Bereavement

The loss of a loved one is life's most stressful event and can cause a major emotional crisis. After the death of someone you love, you experience bereavement, which literally means "to be deprived by death."

Knowing what to expect

When a death takes place, you may experience a wide range of emotions, even when the death is expected. Many people report feeling an initial stage of numbness after first learning of a death, but there is no real order to the grieving process.

Some emotions you may experience include:

- Denial
- Disbelief
- Confusion
- Shock
- Sadness
- Yearning
- Anger
- Humiliation
- Despair
- Guilt

These feelings are normal and are common reactions to loss. You may not be prepared for the intensity and duration of your emotions or how swiftly your moods may change. You may even begin to doubt the stability of your mental health. But be assured that these feelings are healthy and appropriate, and will help you come to terms with your loss.

Mourning a loved one

It's not easy to cope after a loved one dies. You will mourn and grieve. Mourning is the natural process you go through to accept a major loss. Mourning may include religious traditions honoring the dead or gathering with friends and family to share your loss. Mourning is personal and may last months or years.

Grieving is the outward expression of your loss. Your grief is likely to be expressed physically, emotionally and psychologically. For instance, crying is a physical expression, while depression is a psychological expression.

It's very important to allow yourself to express these feelings. Often, death is a subject that is avoided, ignored or denied. At first it may seem helpful to separate yourself from the pain, but you cannot avoid grieving forever. Someday those buried feelings will need to be resolved or they may cause physical or emotional illnesses.

Many people report physical symptoms that accompany grief. Stomach pain, loss of appetite, intestinal upsets, sleep disturbances and loss of energy are all common symptoms of acute grief. Of all life's

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stresses, mourning can seriously test your natural defense systems. Existing illnesses may worsen or new conditions may develop.

Profound emotional reactions may occur. These reactions include anxiety attacks, chronic fatigue, depression and thoughts of suicide. An obsession with the deceased is also a common reaction to death.

Dealing with a major loss

The death of a loved one is always difficult. Your reactions are influenced by the circumstances of a death, particularly when it is sudden or accidental. Your reactions are also influenced by your relationship with the person who died.

A child's death arouses an overwhelming sense of injustice – for lost potential, unfulfilled dreams and senseless suffering. Parents may feel responsible for the child's death, no matter how irrational that may seem. Parents may also feel that they have lost a vital part of their own identity.

A spouse's death is also very traumatic. In addition to severe emotional shock, the death may cause a potential financial crisis if the spouse was the family's main income source. The death may necessitate major social adjustments requiring the surviving spouse to parent alone, adjust to single life and maybe even return to work.

Elderly people may be especially vulnerable when they lose a spouse because it means losing a lifetime of shared experiences. At this time, feelings of loneliness may be compounded by the death of close friends.

A loss due to suicide can be one of the most difficult losses to bear. They may leave the survivors with a tremendous burden of guilt, anger and shame. Survivors may even feel responsible for the death. Seeking counseling during the first weeks after the suicide is particularly beneficial and advisable.

Living with grief

Coping with death is vital to your mental health. It is only natural to experience grief when a loved one dies. The best thing you can do is allow yourself to grieve. There are many ways to cope effectively with your pain.

- *Seek out caring people.* Find relatives and friends who can understand your feelings of loss. Join support groups with others who are experiencing similar losses.
- *Express your feelings.* Tell others how you are feeling; it will help you to work through the grieving process.
- *Take care of your health.* Maintain regular contact with your family physician, and be sure to eat well and get plenty of rest. Be aware of the danger of developing a dependence on medication or alcohol to deal with your grief.
- *Accept that life is for the living.* It takes effort to begin to live again in the present and not dwell on the past.
- *Postpone major life changes.* Try to hold off on making any major changes, such as moving, remarrying, changing jobs or having another child. You should give yourself time to adjust to your loss.
- *Be patient.* It can take months or even years to absorb a major loss and accept your changed life.

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- *Seek outside help when necessary.* If your grief seems like it is too much to bear, seek professional assistance to help work through your grief. It's a sign of strength, not weakness, to seek help.

Remember – It takes time to fully absorb the impact of a major loss. You never stop missing your loved one, but the pain eases after time and allows you to go on with your life.

Helping others grieve

If someone you care about has lost a loved one, you can help them through the grieving process.

- *Share the sorrow.* Allow them – even encourage them – to talk about their feelings of loss and share memories of the deceased.
- *Don't offer false comfort.* It doesn't help the grieving person when you say "it was for the best" or "you'll get over it in time." Instead, offer a simple expression of sorrow and take time to listen.
- *Offer practical help.* Baby-sitting, cooking and running errands are all ways to help someone who is in the midst of grieving.
- *Be patient.* Remember that it can take a long time to recover from a major loss. Make yourself available to talk.
- *Encourage professional help when necessary.* Don't hesitate to recommend professional help when you feel someone is experiencing too much pain to cope alone.

Helping children grieve

Children who experience a major loss may grieve differently than adults. A parent's death can be particularly difficult for small children, affecting their sense of security or survival. Often, they are confused about the changes they see taking place around them, particularly if well-meaning adults try to protect them from truth or from their surviving parent's display of grief.

Limited understanding and an inability to express feelings put very young children at a special disadvantage. Young children may revert to earlier behaviors (such as bed-wetting), ask questions about the deceased that seem insensitive, invent games about dying or pretend that the death never happened.

Coping with a child's grief puts added strain on a bereaved parent. However, angry outbursts or criticism only deepen a child's anxiety and delays recovery. Instead, talk honestly with children in terms they can understand. Take extra time to talk with them about death and the person who has died. Explain to them what happens next such as burial and memorial services, and take time to answer any questions. Help them work through their feelings and remember that they are looking to adults for suitable behavior.

For more information, contact Mental Health America at 414-276-3122 or visit our web site at www.mhawisconsin.org.

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