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When You Feel Grief's Emotions

Understanding Your Journey Through Grief

Bereavement is one of the most common yet least understood experiences of life. You are probably discovering that grief is really a collision of all the emotions and feelings you can imagine. Sometimes, it seems that sorrow, joy, anger, guilt, fear, loneliness, and worry are all clamoring for your attention at once!

Life seems to have disintegrated for you, perhaps, and you may think that you are literally losing your mind! After the numbness and initial shock begin to wear off, life may seem like it is falling apart. Perhaps you feel like you are in a fog or performing like a robot. These are some of the reasons most experts advise grieving people to avoid making major life decisions like selling your home or changing jobs in the first year or so of bereavement.

You may feel ***anger*** now, an emotion experienced by most grieving people during their bereavement. Maybe your anger is directed at the doctors—"They should have done more." Perhaps it is directed at God—"If he really cared for me, this would not have happened." You may find your anger is even directed at your loved-one who died—"How could she/he just abandon me like this?" Though some people say that anger is wrong, it is a real part of the grief process, experienced by people from all ethnic backgrounds, cultures, and religious perspectives.

Guilt can also be particularly strong during grief. Guilt invades when we perceive that we have done something wrong or failed to do something right. You know the feeling: "If I had insisted she go to the doctor earlier. . ." or "If only I had been home, I could have called the paramedics."

When you feel yourself sinking into the hopeless quicksand of "what ifs" and "if only's," you might find it helpful to write an imaginary "letter" of apology to the person who died, asking for his or her forgiveness. Recalling memories— the months and years you had together—may also help you put the guilt-producing events in the context of your entire relationship.

Fear often breaks through in bereavement, too. You may fear what is unknown about the future, the changes in relationships, or the new responsibilities you now carry. If you fear for your safety while in your home, check that the locks are in good, working order and perhaps have a knowledgeable friend or professional make a home security assessment. When you find yourself afraid you will get sick, a common fear for people who have cared for a terminally ill loved one, talk to your doctor about a thorough physical exam.

Loneliness is perhaps the most persistent of the emotions of grief, tending to catch us when we least expect it. While hearing a favorite song or smelling the aroma of a familiar food can be an overwhelming experience of loss, know these can also become the means by which you recall pleasant memories of life with your loved one.

Along with what seems to be unending sadness, these emotions and several dozen others are often experienced as part of the grief process. But remember that every person experiences grief somewhat differently, and there are no timetables or chronological stages through which you must "progress." Remember that the grief you now feel is the normal, natural response to a major loss in your life. Grief is the experience of readjusting our lives, recalibrating to a "new normal" in the light of loss.



Your loved one played many different roles in your life, perhaps including breadwinner, gardener, cook, mechanic, and maid. He or she was perhaps your confidant, life's companion, and best friend. That means your grief is different from that of anyone else's, even if they did experience a "similar" loss. So don't be afraid to express ***your*** grief ***your*** way.

Where Do I Go From Here?

You may be struggling with timetables, wondering how long this will take. The fact is the loss of a loved one is never something you "just get over." Your life was profoundly impacted by this person's life, and now your life has been profoundly changed by his or her death.

Participating in a support group with other bereaved people can be a very healing experience. You may also want to consider seeking the counsel of a physician, member of the clergy, or therapist. The objectivity and "listening ear" such a person provides can help you immeasurably.

Often, the journey through grief presents opportunities you would never have otherwise seen. And that's the best part of traveling on this journey. Unexpected storms often produce the most fabulous rainbows. Unintended detours can introduce you to incredible vistas you would never otherwise have seen. Even being forced to slow down on this journey can give you time for looking inside yourself and reevaluating what you really treasure in life.

Life is different now, and it promises many more changes in the months and years ahead. There is life beyond loss! Positive change and personal growth can be yours, even when you must say good-bye and feel grief's emotions.

Write a note to your loved one:

Dear _____ ,

_____

_____

_____

_____

Sincerely, _____

"Unexpected storms often produce the most fabulous rainbows."

We understand the importance of being present, listening with our hearts and being aware of how seemingly small details make a huge difference. Our desire is to encourage you in your journey through grief by providing resources that will be helpful. This brochure is one way of helping our families and our community. Please contact us if you desire additional grief care through local support groups, trained counselors, local/ national resources or educational presentations.

This article was written by William G. Hoy. After a career spanning more than 40 years of caring for the dying and bereaved, Dr. Hoy is retired as Clinical Professor of Medical Humanities at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. He writes and speaks extensively on issues related to end-of-life care and bereavement. Copyright © 2024. All rights reserved. Used by permission.



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