

Stages of Grief

Normal and Abnormal Grief

Normal grief can be mild or intense. In response to a major loss, most people feel shock and astonishment. The first thing they may say is, "I can't believe this happened." Then they often go through a period of intense sadness and find no enjoyment in things that normally brought them happiness. The person feeling grief may withdraw and want to be alone for a time. At some point, people usually need to protest the loss by getting angry at whatever they think caused the loss. At the end of this process, they gradually come to terms with the loss. *Abnormal grief* can be felt in response to an important or a minor loss. Signs of abnormal grief include the following:

- Having intense physical problems that go on for long periods of time
- Being preoccupied with the loss for many years
- Feeling overwhelmed by guilt for a long time
- Isolating oneself from friends and family

While many people may have some physical symptoms during times of grief, most do not have intense physical problems for long periods of time. Although many people are preoccupied with major losses for a time, it usually passes within weeks, months, or maybe years. But they eventually "let go" and come to terms with their loss. Although the pain of some losses, such as a death of a loved one, may never go away completely, constantly thinking about the person and being sad should eventually go away. While many feel guilty about certain losses, most people do not let the guilt overpower them. Even when they directly caused the loss, most people realize that continual guilt is self-destructive. Although grief makes most people want to withdraw socially, they still find comfort in the company of others. Grief does not usually cause a person to stop feeling warmth in relationships with others.

How Do You Deal with Loss?

People deal with loss in very different ways. You may have heard of instances with elderly couples, in which one person died within a few weeks or months of the other because the grief was so great. But other people go through incredible losses, yet still lead happy, healthy, and positive lives. Losses can become major crises that stop people from growing emotionally and socially—or losses can also be successfully incorporated into life, becoming powerful learning and growing experiences. Growing from losses may involve an evaluation of the meaning of the loss for you.

- **The need for self-assessment.** Self-evaluation is necessary to fully understand how losses affect one's life and what steps need to be taken in order to return to a healthy life.
- **The need to assess relationship changes.** Losses may involve the death of a friend or relative, the loss of a friendship, or the loss of someone's trust. Before there can be any healing of a relationship, it is essential to clearly understand what the relationship was, and what it appears to be now. Relationships often change because the roles and responsibilities

that people have toward one another change. Thus, it is important to describe what the roles were, and what they appear to be now.

- **The need to assess changes in routines.** Major losses may cause changes in routines and habits. For example, following the death of a spouse, people often go through a long period of crisis and stop their normal routines. Understanding how habits have been put aside can help the person get through the crisis and return to a more comfortable routine.

Grief Reactions:

It is normal for people to feel grief after a loss. However, the specific type of grief reaction will depend upon several factors. The more important a loss is, the more intense the grief.

Emotional symptoms include misery, despair, apathy, depression, self-doubt, confusion, fear, loss of sex drive, loss of appetite, shame, guilt, and anger at oneself or others. Intense grief may include *physical symptoms* such as nervousness, restlessness, insomnia, headaches, backaches, weakness, fatigue, and exhaustion.

Factors That Affect Loss and Grief

People differ in the ways that they handle losses and feel grief. Some of the factors that affect how one experiences grief include:

Coping ability.

People who have had previous crises and losses may be better prepared for losses and grief because they have already developed some ability to cope with the trauma.

Importance of the loss.

The more important the loss is, the more powerful the grief. The death of a loved one is going to cause more intense grief than the death of a distant relative.

Circumstances of the loss.

The circumstances of the loss affect how intense the grief is. The grief one feels for someone who died a violent death, such as by suicide or murder, will be more intense than grief for someone who had been sick for a while and passed away while sleeping.

Problems associated with the loss.

The ability of people to deal with problems related to losses can affect grief. For instance, a person's ability to handle problems associated with the criminal justice system, the medical system, financial matters, or other people can make his or her reaction to a loss worse or better.

Customs and rituals.

People with religious beliefs and rituals, as well as cultural customs related to grieving, may have a better understanding of how they can express their grief. This can help lessen the effects of the grief.

Emotional support.

Emotional and social support from family, friends, acquaintances, and other people can improve a person's ability to handle losses.

Return to normal routine.

The more difficult the loss, the longer it takes someone to return to normal habits and routines. However, it works the other way as well. The sooner a person can return to habits and routines, such as normal eating and sleeping patterns or a regular work schedule, the better he or she may be able to cope with the grief.

Resuming pleasurable activities.

The ability of people to again enjoy the pleasurable things in life, feel good about them-selves, and become hopeful about the future can help to heal the pain of loss.

Stages of Grief:

- Stage 1: Emotional Shock
- Stage 2: Emotional Disorganization
- Stage 3: Denial
- Stage 4: Exhaustion and Renewal
- Stage 5: Emotional Healing

People go through grief in stages. They often experience one stage of grief before going to another. However, many people do not go through these stages in a set order, but move in and out of the various stages at different times. Being able to recognize these stages of grief can help people better understand what they are going through. For people who are recovering from drug and alcohol addiction, understanding and recognizing the stages of grief lets them realize that their experiences are natural, normal, and temporary. This realization helps them understand that they are going through grief and should ask others for help and not use a drug to get rid of the feeling.

Knowing about the stages of grief can also help people understand what they may expect to feel following a loss. Health care professionals use this information to recognize whether or not people are successfully working through grief, and to help people work through these stages.

Stage 1: Emotional Shock

When people experience a significant loss, they often feel an initial emotional shock, which can be a brief and rapid event or a prolonged event, lasting a few days or weeks. Most people in shock feel a kind of emotional numbness. They may say, "It just doesn't seem real." After the period of shock, many people don't remember much about this time when they were emotionally numb.

During the period of emotional shock, some people will have overwhelming feelings of panic and fear, causing them to seek the comfort and help of friends and family. Others may become angry, perhaps even irrational and filled with uncontrollable rage.

While it is normal to experience emotional shock in response to important losses, not everyone experiences it. Some people are better prepared for crises than other people.

Some of the common characteristics of emotional shock include the following:

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| • Disbelief | • Agitation | • Helplessness |
| • Fear | • Panic | • Anger |
| • Doubt | • Disorientation | • Incapacitation |
| • Restlessness | • Detachment | • Rage |
| • Confusion | | |

Stage 2: Emotional Disorganization

When the emotional shock of a major loss wears off, people begin to feel the full impact and pain of the loss. This can be a time of great suffering. The combination of emotions and the life changes that accompany a great loss can unbalance and overwhelm people.

Following major losses, people may think over and over again about the positive and negative aspects of the people or things that have been lost. Grieving people may remember recent arguments with people and forget the good times. Others may remember only the good aspects of a recently lost relative, perhaps even exaggerating these qualities.

Because the rush of these emotions can be overpowering, people may become confused or disturbed by a major loss. These intense feelings are often new and frightening. As a result, people may have a difficult time recognizing some of the feelings they are having, like bitterness, anger, self-pity, and guilt. People may question their ability to deal with the emotions and survive what they are going through in grieving. Some people may have a temporary loss of self-esteem. These feelings of confusion and emotional disorganization are temporary and will diminish over time.

Some of the characteristics of emotional disorganization include the following:

- Rumination
- Worry
- Conflicts
- Separation anxiety
- Anger
- Bitterness
- Guilt
- Self-pity
- Prolonged stress
- Oversensitivity

Stage 3: Denial

Throughout the grieving process, people fight against accepting or believing that they have undergone a loss. Often they do this without really realizing it. Much like in addiction, denial is a part of grieving—it is an unconscious way of protecting oneself from facing certain very painful aspects of the loss. Sometimes, as a form of denial, people will have a strong feeling that isn't what they would expect to be having. For example, rather than feeling a sense of loss, some people will have feelings such as jealousy, anger, or shame, which are replacements for the experience of loss.

Jealousy.

People who have gone through a significant loss may become very jealous in situations that remind them of what they've lost. Often without realizing it, they become angry and jealous of others who still enjoy something that they lost. For example, a man whose wife left him because of his addiction may stop spending time with a close friend, because the friend has a happy marriage. Without realizing it, the man may have become jealous of his friend.

Anger and aggression.

Some people react to loss by feeling anger, which can be displayed through aggression, irritation, and resentment. They may become annoyed at someone who tries to help them or very angry with friends for almost no reason. For some people, it is easier to feel anger and resentment than to feel a sense of loss.

Shame.

Following a major loss, some people feel an overpowering sense of shame. For example, someone may regret the things said to a friend who recently died in an accident or regret not spending more time with a grandparent after he or she passed away. Some may feel shame because they were spared injury while another person was hurt or killed. During the grieving process, feeling a sense of shame can be a way to avoid the deeper sense of loss.

Stage 4: Exhaustion and Renewal

When people go through a period of emotional shock and turmoil, they use up a lot of emotional and physical energy. Going through a crisis also often disturbs people's normal sleeping and eating habits, which will make them more tired, both physically and mentally. People going through a major loss may often end up in a state of exhaustion, in which they feel very fatigued, unable to concentrate, and drained of energy.

These people may feel so sad and depressed that they withdraw emotionally and physically from other people. They may feel lonely and lack confidence. Some people may feel hopeless or even suicidal.

This period of exhaustion is a time to recharge one's energy. During this phase, a person needs to rest and recuperate from the emotionally draining process of grieving. The grieving process usually doesn't end here, and a person will need to gather more energy for the difficult work ahead.

Some of the characteristics of emotional and physical exhaustion include the following:

- Fatigue
- Lack of energy
- Exhaustion
- Sadness
- Depression
- Hopelessness
- Suicidal thoughts
- Hibernation
- Physical withdrawal
- Emotional withdrawal

Stage 5: Emotional Healing

At some point in the grieving process, people usually enter a stage of emotional healing in which they begin to learn from the experience of grief and loss. This healing process takes some effort on the part of the grieving individual. There are a number of things a person needs to do in order to recover from the crisis and, it is hoped, learn from it.

Resume control.

Following a major loss, most people feel as if things are out of control. They go through a chaotic period in which it seems as if they are at the mercy of forces beyond their control. During this time of crisis, things that were once very important are forced to the side as the person becomes preoccupied with other thoughts, feelings, and activities. As the chaos begins to diminish, people can begin to take back control over their lives—first by returning to the routines they put aside during the crisis period.

Abandon old roles.

When a friend or relative dies, not only do others lose that person, but also they lose the role they played in the relationship with that person. For example, consider the death of a woman who was a

mother to her children and a wife to her husband. Following her death, the man is no longer a husband, since he no longer has a wife. As the man begins to accept the fact that he is no longer a husband but is now a single parent, he takes another step in the healing process.

Search for meaning.

There usually comes a time during the grieving process when people realize that feelings of bitterness and anger are not helping them. This realization may replace these feelings with a more thoughtful, but still emotional, search for meaning. Many people go through a spiritual awakening as the result of a major loss, while others find new meaning in the power of friendships and family. It is an important step to incorporate the lessons learned through grieving into one's life.

Reorganize priorities.

Losses may help people to realize that things they once thought were important really aren't. For example, after a major loss, families who have always focused on their disagreements may come to realize that the things they share are much more important than the things they disagree about. The loss or near loss of a friend or relative can make someone realize how important it is to live one day at a time and to express feelings of love and concern to others. Sometimes it is only by losing things that people realize how important those things really are.

Letting Go

Important losses are often followed by a lot of "second guessing" or thinking about what might have happened if things had been done differently. People sometimes focus on all the little things that led to a significant loss and think how a small change could have made a difference. Some people obsess over the details of a crisis that involved loss, or continually worry about the consequences of a loss.

For most people, these obsessive thoughts about crises, mistakes, and losses gradually fade away as they realize that nothing can be done to change what happened. People become aware that continuing to live in the past will not change the past.

People will have different ways of letting go, depending on their background and the nature of the loss. For instance, a funeral ceremony is a powerful way for people to deal with the emotions they feel over a friend's death and say a final good-bye. People who have lost jobs may begin to let go of the loss by looking for a new job. Often, letting go occurs as someone begins to have new, positive experiences and returns to healthy routines.

Letting go of losses is not the same as forgetting or ignoring losses. Letting go means that the losses are no longer the most important and powerful influences over an individual. Even after letting go, a loss may still cause sadness, but it is no longer the cause of overpowering grief.

Forgiveness

One of the things that keeps people from letting go of painful losses is a difficulty in forgiving. In some ways, it is easier to remain angry and irritated at whoever or whatever one thinks caused the loss than it is to let go of the loss. Some people may stay very angry about their loss in a general way. Others may remain angry with themselves or with a specific person they think is to blame for the loss. Some people may feel a need to blame their loss on someone or something. By staying angry, they can do this.

Being angry can also make people think that they are actually doing something about the loss. It may be easier to remain angry and blame someone or something because it is at least an active process. When people can criticize and complain, they feel that they are actively involved with the loss. Unfortunately, clinging to anger and the need to assign blame actually interferes with the grieving process.

Letting go involves forgiveness, either forgiving someone who caused a loss or forgiving oneself. The most difficult act of forgiveness may be toward people who have died: forgiving them for any harm they may have caused while living.