



Experiences of Grief

Grief is a normal and natural reaction to the death of a loved one. Most of us are not prepared for the long journey of grief. It is sometimes devastating, frightening, and often lonely.

The experiences of grief have been compared to enduring a fierce storm at sea. The waves are peaked and close together. Eventually the sea becomes calmer, but occasionally the storm regroups, strengthening without any warning. For several hours, days or weeks you may not feel grief. Then suddenly you meet someone, see something, or hear something that triggers a grief response. It can seem as if you are taking one step forward and two steps back.

It is important to understand some of the following concepts about grief:

- To deny our feelings only prolongs our grief. The expression of grief is essential for good emotional and physical health

even though it is painful and difficult. There are no easy answers or short cuts and no way under, over or around your grief. Although grief may hurt desperately, you must go through it.

- No two people grieve the same, even in the same family.
- It is strongly suggested not to make major decisions (such as moving, money matters, etc.) unless financially or absolutely necessary during the early stages of grief when judgment is cloudy.
- Find someone who will listen. Talking is therapy.
- Grief has no timetable. Grief often takes much longer than the bereaved or the people in their lives expect. It helps to take one hour or one day at a time. Remember to be patient with yourself. Recovering from grief takes time.

Early Bereavement Support Group

Where:

Wilson Support Center
150 Bennett Road
Cheektowaga, NY 14227

When:

Second Wednesday of the month from 5:30 - 6:30 pm

This group is offered up to and including the first four months of bereavement. Early Bereavement Support Group is offered in addition to monthly bereavement support groups.

Take Care of Yourself

You most likely have been physically and emotionally drained or exhausted from grief. At this time, it is important that you take care of yourself. We often take care of everyone around us with little attention to ourselves and our own needs. This can lead to illness or emotional breakdown. By following these five guidelines, physical and emotional health will be nurtured. It is always hard to find time for ourselves but, at this time we need to make it a priority.

Eat Well: At this time of emotional and physical depletion, your body needs good nourishment more than ever. If you can only pick at food, a vitamin supplement might be helpful, but it will not fully make up for a poor diet.

Exercise Regularly: Return to your old program of exercise or start one as soon as possible. Exercise releases tension and anxiety. Depression can be lightened a little by the biochemical changes brought by exercise; and you will sleep better. An hour long walk every day is ideal for many people.

Avoid Drugs and Sedatives: Although drugs may provide some immediate relief, most depress our bodily system and create a stronger depressive grief reaction. They must not be taken for the purpose of avoiding emotional pain. When we turn to these substances, we are only momentarily suppressing the grief. The grief then resurfaces later.

Rest and Sleep: Some degree of sleep disturbance is natural. However, a lack of sufficient sleep may lead to mental and physical exhaustion. Speak with your primary physician if you have severe insomnia.

Physical Health: A certain amount of physical disturbance is a normal component of grief since it assaults the body as well as the mind. Bereavement is a time of high health risk. Be sure to schedule a medical evaluation and follow-up on physical symptoms if they develop.



Suggestions to Aid Sleep

Many people suffer periods of insomnia after a death. The stress of bereavement often makes our thoughts race; making it difficult to fall asleep or get back to sleep. Here are some suggestions to help you.

- Don't try to force sleep. If you cannot fall asleep after thirty minutes, get up and do something peaceful, like knitting or reading. Then try to go back to bed. Repeat this if necessary.
- Learn some kind of relaxation technique such as meditation.
- Exercise daily, but not close to bedtime.
- Be aware that sleeping pills, alcohol and cigarettes may even cause insomnia. Alcohol or sleeping pills may aid us to go to sleep but, as soon as they are out of our systems, we wake up. We build up a tolerance and then require a higher dosage to promote sleep. Barbiturates can cause death when taken with alcohol.
- Try not to spend daytime hours in your bedroom. Reserve that room for sleeping at night. Do not nap during the day. Avoid heavy meals before retiring.
- Try curling up in bed with a pillow or large, soft stuffed animal. It may aid you as it did when you were little.
- Widowed people have suggested sleeping in a different room, sleeping on your spouse's side of the bed so your side is empty instead, and putting a pillow behind your back as you lie on your side.
- Drink some caffeine free chamomile tea before bed time to ease and relax you. There are brands in your local supermarket referred to as "Sleepytime" that many people feel help to relax them.
- Melatonin aids initially falling asleep. It is found in the vitamin section of most stores.

Coping as a Family

Communication is the key to coping and growing through grief as a family. It is important to be together to talk, cry, vent or even sit in silence. At the same time there should be respect for each member's way of handling his or her grief. Some family members will grieve privately, others openly, and others with a combination of these two styles. In many ways each family member must grieve alone. Here are some suggestions to help with family grief.

- Maintain a balance of attention between deceased family members and surviving family members.
- Try to be sensitive to each other's feelings. Feelings are often difficult to verbalize. Listen to what is meant as well as to what is said.
- It may be helpful to set aside time to be "alone together" as a family or to even hold a family meeting. Encourage but don't pressure family members to talk and express grief in their own way. Be a good listener.
- Plan family projects or trips.
- Be careful not to give each other the silent treatment. Make sure the person who has died continues to be mentioned in family conversations.
- Everyone has a unique way of grieving, which can at times be confusing among family members. Accept each person's method of coping.
- Discuss the loved one's former role in the family which now necessitates changes in family duties and new roles for the survivors in the family. Be careful not to expect a family member to replace or to be the same as the member who died. This is especially true for children.
- If depression, withdrawal, grief or family problems are getting out of control, seek professional help.
- Recognize that benchmarks such as wedding anniversaries, birthdays and holidays may be difficult for the family. Try to discuss, as a family how you would like to observe these occasions. Often the anticipation of the day is worse than when the day occurs if you have a plan. Should there be a variation on traditional celebrations? Do any family members have particular concerns, suggestions?
- Consult family members on the disbursement of the deceased loved one's possessions, including their room. Take your time and tread carefully where these precious mementos are concerned. If possible, postpone making major decisions for the first year unless financial or medical need arises.
- Studies show that a bereaved person's self-esteem can be extremely low. Survivors should work on their self-image as they re-establish themselves in society after a loss. It is important to help each family member think and feel good about him or herself.
- It is difficult to help your family if you are falling apart. Working on your own grief will eventually enable you to help your family to cope with their grief.
- **Remember you can reach a Hospice Grief Counselor by calling (716) 601-3888.**



Helping Children Through Grief

The grieving process of children is affected to a large extent by the age or stage of development of the child. Below is a list of suggestions that may be helpful in supporting a child's grieving process.

- Set aside time to talk with your child – explain the events that are occurring, why you are crying, etc.
- Listen to your child's feelings and allow them to speak uninterrupted. Just as you need someone to listen to your feelings, they need you to listen to them.
- Do not discourage them from displaying emotion. Using phrases such as "do not cry" or "you must be strong for the family" are harmful phrases, not helpful. Tell them many different feelings are normal.
- Use the deceased person's name when referring to him/her.
- Avoid the phrases that "soften the blow": phrases such as "sleeping", "went on a vacation", "God took them", or "God needed them more than we did", etc. They only confuse and scare a child. These often lead to undesired behaviors in children.
- Use basic words like "die" and "dead" to convey the message.
- Be sensitive to the age of your child and his/her level of understanding – don't offer information beyond the child's comprehension, as it will only confuse matters.
- Let your child ask questions. Answer truthfully! Be honest, simple and direct. If you don't understand something, let your child know that, too.
- Read, or have your child read, children's books related to death, and discuss them with your child. Many are available at your local library or in the Life Transitions Center library.
- Read books yourself on helping a child through grief – there are many excellent books that will be specific to your child's developmental level and age.
- Play with the child (e.g. dolls, drawing, imagining) in ways that will allow the child to express his/her feelings.
- Watch for TV programs that might help your child's understanding.
- Share your feelings and experiences with the child if he/she is able to understand them. You are a role model for your child – if you hide your grief, they will learn to hide it too.
- Allow your child to participate if he/she wants to: by going to the wake, funeral, and/or visiting the cemetery. It is encouraged for children to attend; however, it is very important that you don't pressure your child into doing any of these things! If they do choose to attend, explain to them what they may see before you arrive and answer any questions.
- Do not give the child the message they can take a deceased adult's place. They need permission to still be a kid.
- Accept help from others to watch your children and talk with them – but, remember, you are the most important person to your child! Be sure that others that speak to your children understand what not to say to your child.
- Let your child vent his/her emotions and acknowledge them, e.g. crying, hugging, throwing a ball, letter writing, punching or jumping on a pillow.
- Watch for extreme changes in behavior such as eating and/or sleeping disturbances over a long period of time. Fights at school or with siblings as well as changes in attitude need further evaluation from parents or professionals.
- Communicate to the child your appreciation for having had the deceased person around.
- Help the child to recover memories about their loved one. Photo albums and newspaper clippings will help get you started.
- Plan some things that you and your child can look forward to.
- Discuss and have the child recognize changes in routine due to the death.
- If you would like more information about grieving please contact the Hospice Bereavement Team at (716) 601-3888.

