

Coping With Loss

by Jim Kendall, LCSW

All of us will face the need to grieve at one time or another. Grief is related to love and attachment; it is love under the condition of absence. Grieving is loving someone who is no longer there. Loss, death and grief are part of the human experience. To grieve is normal; to not grieve is pathological. We grieve for the loss of friends and family.

We also we grieve for loss of health, jobs, stages of life, possessions and other things. There is a grieving process that occurs in response to these losses too. The tendency is for the individual to experience this grief alone, and this can often lead to an unrecognized depression.

We cannot change the fact of the loss; we are left with memories and feelings. For each, there will be a healing process that includes the process of grief. Grief takes us through stages that come and go and often confuse us. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross defined "Five Stages of Grieving" that most people go through. The stages are not always clearly separated or sequential.

Initially we are caught in **disbelief or denial**. "It can't be me...!"

As the reality settles in, we find ourselves second-guessing, "If only ..." a stage called **bargaining**. The loss leaves us asking why this life was taken from us. We want answers when all we are left with is questions. We must rely on our beliefs and faith that are often tested during these times.

Soon this gives way to the emotion of **anger**, also a stage of grief. We can be angry at our bodies for aging, at the situation, at the person who has died or at God. Anger is not logical and it is not fair. It is an emotion that can be displaced on others because we don't know what to do with it.

This can give way to extreme **sadness and depression** at our loss and our inability to control events or understand them. It is a feeling of helplessness- the lack of power to change things. It is very normal and healthy to cry over the loss of someone who meant a great deal to you-someone you cared about. It is also normal to feel sadness over the loss of physical functioning.

Eventually, with time and support, we hope to reach a stage of grief called **acceptance**. This means that you can remember the one who is gone with love and fondness, yet be able to share memories with a range of emotions. You don't forget, but you may be able to control when the thoughts and feelings come on. Don't judge your feelings; they are not bad or good.

You need to talk and share your feelings with peers, family and friends. That is part of the healing process. It is not easy. Time helps in healing wounds only if you are actively

working on the grieving process. Active grieving requires talking out loud with others, not just thinking about it. Sharing good feelings with someone else makes you feel good; surprisingly, sharing bad feelings with people often makes people feel better. Psychiatrist George Engel, MD from the University of Rochester defined "Four Tasks of Mourning" as:

1. **Accept the Reality (and Meaning) of the Loss.** This task requires coming to grips with the loss as real and understanding the meaning that the loss had for you. It requires acceptance of the loss and the value that loss will have for your life.
2. **Experience the Pain and Grief.** Dealing with the emotional and physical impact of the loss requires one to experience this pain. It is impossible to lose someone or something that was important to you without feeling the pain. The intensity varies from person to person but the need to grieve remains universal.
3. **Adjust to an Environment in which the Deceased is Missing.** In any bereavement, the loss is seldom clear-cut. This task involves adapting to the loss.
4. **Withdraw Emotional Energy and Reinvest it in Another Relationship.** Many people misinterpret this task. In the case of the loss of a spouse, a friend or something meaningful, withdrawing emotional attachment doesn't change the memory or dishonor the individual. It allows one to live in the present rather than being stuck in the past. Loving someone else doesn't negate the love that was held for the deceased. This is a difficult task to complete.

One benchmark of the completed grief process is when the person is able to think and talk of the deceased without pain. There may always be sadness but it is not in the form of active physical or emotional pain. The mourner is able to reinvest energy into living and enjoying the present. Responses to the stress involved in loss can produce symptoms including depression, anxiety, panic attacks, nightmares, sleep problems, appetite changes, nausea, concentration problems, fatigue and fear of repetition. These can be normal responses to sudden loss or unresolved grief.

If it gets unmanageable, you may need to get help from a physician, therapist, a trusted person in your life or your Work/Life Connections-EAP at (615) 936-1327 to help you deal with these symptoms. Please ask for help. This can be a difficult emotional time for you.