

## Grief is Not a Sign of Weakness

Grief is not a sign of weakness. It is, rather, a healthy and fitting response to a loss, a tribute to a loved one who has died. Running away from grief postpones sorrow, clinging to grief prolongs pain. Neither approach leads to healing. Allow grief to have its way for a while; then, gradually and gently, you can release yourself from its grip. Recognition of the appropriateness and the value of grief is the first step in accepting the reality of the loss. And acceptance is the first sign of recovery.

Each of us is different, but for most people grieving follows a pattern. We do not all experience every phase. Nor do we move through grief at the same pace or with equal intensity. The following characteristics constitute **the basic elements for the grief experience**. Reviewing them might help you to identify your own pattern, determine where you are in the process, and anticipate what you have yet to go through.

### Shock

A period of numbness usually follows the event of a loved one's death. One feels stunned; in a trance. It could last only minutes, but also persist for days or even longer. The state of shock allows a person time to absorb what has happened and to begin to adjust. There's also a tendency to leave decision-making to others. Yet, it is important to face the reality of the death and to regain control of the direction of one's life.

### Emotional upheaval

As shock wears off, grief gives rise to a variety of emotions. When such feelings seem overwhelming, we do well to defer major decisions. Other grievers and counselors can help us interpret and deal with these feelings. As we come to understand what we experience, we can find appropriate ways to ventilate our emotions and to channel them to our advantage.

### Physical distress

The mental and emotional upset of a loss can cause physical distress and make us vulnerable to illness. Grief sometimes causes us to neglect healthy nourishment and exercises or to overindulge ourselves in drugs, smoking, or medication. We might need a doctor's advice in regard to our symptoms, their causes and their treatment.

### Panic

The death of a loved one makes the future very uncertain. We might panic in the face of the unknown and the fear of "going it alone." Panic prevents concentration and defers acceptance of the finality of death. It tempts us to run from life, to avoid people and to refuse to try new things. Patience with ourselves and a willingness to accept help from others will enable us to subdue panic and outgrow its confusion.

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### **Guilt**

Many people fault themselves in connection with a loved one's death. We have all made mistakes in our relationships and sincere regret is the best response to them. However, self-reproach out of proportion to our behavior can affect our mental health and impede our recovery from grief. Close friends or a trusted counselor can aid us in confronting and dealing with guilt feelings, whether justified or exaggerated.

### **Hostility**

People in grief naturally ask "WHY?" Why him? Why now? Why like this? Most of these questions have no answers. Frustration then causes us to feel resentment and anger. We want someone to blame: God, doctors, clergy, ourselves, even the person who died. If we can accept the lack of answers to "Why?," we might begin to ask, instead, what we can do now to grow through what has happened. Then we have started to move beyond anger and toward hope.

### **Depression**

Grievors typically, but in varying degrees, experience loneliness and depression. This pain, too, will pass. It is important to realize that being alone need not inevitably result in loneliness. Moreover, stresses other than the death-loss could account for depression. Reaching out to others is a key way to lessen loneliness and to overcome depression.

### **Aimlessness**

At times in the grieving process a kind of drifting occurs. Mourners find it difficult to return to familiar, even necessary, activities. We prefer to day-dream about what was or fantasize about what might have been. If we can foster gratitude for the past and begin to access our potential for the future, this will prove a passing phase rather than a permanent state of aimlessness.

### **Hope**

In time and with effort, hope grows. We can express emotions without embarrassment or apology. We can feel concern for and show interest in others. We can make decisions and assume responsibility for ourselves. The example of other recovered grievors can serve as signs of hope for ourselves.

### **Reaffirmation**

Eventually, a bereaved person recognizes and embraces a healing truth: grief has changed me, but has not destroyed me. I've discovered new things about myself. I can build on the strengths developed through adversity. I'm no longer my "old self," but I'm still me, and I face the future with confidence.