

What is Grief?

At some point in time, all people will experience grief related to a loss. Grief is a normal and natural part of the human experience and can arise as a response to different types of loss. When most people think of grief, they think of losing a loved one. However, death is not the only loss that can create a grief response. For example, losses can range from a change in relationship status, identity, employment, sense of safety or order, resources, address, etc.

Grief as a Process

Grief reactions (including duration and intensity) are different for each individual, but can involve emotional, social, and physical components. It is important to know that grief is understood as a process, and one that takes time. Throughout this process, an individual may experience many changes in how they express their grief and may benefit from knowing that there is no correct way to grieve. Below are some three common stages or experiences of the grief process.

Shock and Denial

Because learning of a loss can be suddenly overwhelming, shock often occurs and is a typical, initial reaction. Individuals often experience emotional numbness when in shock, and may even have difficulty making decisions, focusing, or attending to daily tasks. The duration of shock can be short (e.g., minutes or hours) or, for more traumatic losses, long (e.g., days). As experiences of shock begin to decrease, an individual may have difficulty acknowledging the loss as real or true. Feelings of denial often follow loss and may represent difficulty adjusting to change or transition, a wish for life as it were before the loss occurred, or an attempt to avoid distressing emotions related to the loss. Though denial is a common grief reaction, it is important to eventually acknowledge the loss so that the process of grieving can continue.

Suffering

Once an individual accepts that the loss has occurred, a period of suffering tends to take place, in which a wide range of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors are present. Suffering is often a painful and drawn-out stage of the grieving process, but it is necessary in order for an individual to stabilize and adjust to the loss. When an individual is in the suffering stage, grief is often accompanied by decreased interest in things or activities that were once enjoyable, preoccupied thoughts of the loss, and difficulty with concentration. Common experiences of this stage include:

Sadness

Perhaps the most common feeling associated with grief, sadness includes feeling down, blue, and/or helpless. While sadness is most typically expressed through crying, other manifestations include quietness, lowered energy, changes in sleeping or eating patterns,

or emotional withdrawal. Sadness is usually temporary; when periods of sadness are longer in duration (i.e., greater than two weeks), more intense (e.g., feelings of emptiness, thoughts of death, etc.), and significantly impact daily functioning, it is important to be assessed for depression.

Anger

Often times when change or loss occurs, individuals can be left feeling helpless, powerless, abandoned, disappointed, threatened, or frustrated. Anger is a normative response to these experiences, but can often feel confusing for the grieving individual. It is not uncommon to feel anger towards the original loss or to question your basic beliefs about self, life, spirituality, or justice.

Guilt

Guilt is feeling bad about something you did or failed to do. It is common for grieving individuals to reflect on their life before the loss and experience guilt related to missed opportunities for expression (e.g., love, anger, remorse, etc.) or change (e.g., repairing a relationship, taking a different strategy at work, studying harder for a test, etc.). Grieving individuals may even find themselves wishing or hoping that the loss is reversible or not permanent and that if they behave in a new way perhaps this wish or hope will come true.

Anxiety

Anxiety is related to the fear of the unknown, and because loss often involves a good deal of change, individuals may experience a range of anxiety (from worry to irritability to panic attacks) about their future or how their new life will play out, ability to care for themselves, the well-being of other loved ones, etc.

Acceptance and Recovery

In this final stage of grieving, individuals are able to accept the loss as an important part of one's life as opposed to the center of one's life. Acceptance and recovery, however, does not mean that an individual will never again experience feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, or anxiety about the loss. Instead, an individual will be better able to cope with and make meaning of the loss throughout the remainder of their life.

Tips for the Grief Process

- Try not to avoid grief because addressing the loss is too uncomfortable or frightening. This can make the experience more isolating and difficult than it might be otherwise. Allow yourself to express the full range of emotions that you may be experiencing inside.

- Try not to use drugs, alcohol, or food to cope with the loss. It is important to take care of yourself when grieving by attending to coping strategies that promote wellness (e.g., healthy eating, exercise, and regular sleep).
- While there may be times when grieving alone feels best, it is equally important to stay connected with others. Often times, feelings of sadness, resentment, and guilt can lead us to push others away when grieving, but it is important to reach out for support during times of loss. Those there may be extended periods of time where you might not be motivated to be around others, social support is vital to fight feelings of isolation and despair.
- Try not to rush the process. Remember that grief takes time and that it is normal to need time to incorporate loss into one's life. Grief is not necessarily something to 'get over,' but rather a process to go through.
- Seek professional help if you need it. Often times, individuals may not want to seek support from family or friends, especially if they feel like a burden, their immediate support group was also impacted by the loss, or that others are unable to attend to their grief. Professional help can assist individuals in resolving grief issues. Students who may wish to consult with a counselor at the **Counseling Center** can make an appointment by calling **312-996-3490** or by stopping by the front desk at **1200 West Harrison Street, 2010 SSB, Chicago, Illinois, 60607** between our regular business hours of 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM.

Additional Resources

Besides seeking professional help from the Counseling Center, here are a list of references that provide more information on the grieving process:

Colgrove, Bloomfield & McWilliams (1976). *How to Survive the Loss of a Love*. Leo Press: NY.

Kreis, B., & Patty, A. (1969). *Up from Grief: Patterns of Recovery*. Harper and Row, San Francisco.

Kubler-Ross, E., & Kessler, D. (2005) *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss*. Scribner: New York.

Rando, T. (1988). *How to go on Living when Someone You Love Dies*. Lexington Books: Lexington: MA

Staudacher, Carol (1995). *A Time to Grieve: Meditations for Healing After the Death of a Loved One*. Harper: San Francisco.

