

Grieving

It's a natural and needed reply to loss

SOMEONE CLOSE to you has died. As you struggle to accept this difficult loss, you may find yourself consumed by pain and fear — and grief.

Grief is a natural response to losing someone who was important to you. Grief hurts, but it is necessary. When a death tears your world apart, grieving is the process that helps put it back together.

"Grief allows us to let go of that which was, so we'll be ready for that which is to be. Mourning allows us to disentangle ourselves from the bonds we had with the person we've lost," explains Dr. Therese Rando, a clinical psychologist and author of "Grief, Dying and Death."

While grief is natural, it is also highly individual. How a person grieves depends on a number of factors. Your relationship with the person who died will certainly influence your grief, but so will the age, your sex-role conditioning, your religious beliefs and your previous experiences with death.

The age of the deceased and the circumstances of death will also affect the intensity of your grief. In short, no one can tell you exactly how you will, or should, experience grief.

STILL, CERTAIN REACTIONS to the death of a loved one are quite common, and you can expect some of them. You may go into shock. If the death was unexpected, you may even find yourself denying at first that the person has died.

"You feel numb, you feel like a spectator watching what's going on," explains Dr. Earl Grollman, author of "Living When a Loved One Has Died" and several grief-related books and articles. Dr. Grollman says this response is nature's way of protecting you — of insulating you — from what is happening.

Another immediate reaction to a death is anger. You may feel anger toward the doctors or nurses who couldn't save your loved one, toward the funeral director — even toward God. You may even feel anger toward the person who died for leaving you.

Unfortunately, most of us were taught as children that anger is something to be avoided; you may therefore feel guilty when your anger will not go away.

In fact, you could find yourself feeling guilty for a number of reasons. It is common for a bereaved person to feel guilty simply for being alive when someone else has died. You may believe you somehow should have been present to say goodbye if you weren't. You may dwell on an argument you had with the deceased.

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—Dr. Therese Rando
clinical psychologist

"Human relationships always contain some ambivalence, and no matter how wonderful we may have been to our mother, for example, we'll remember the one time we didn't go out and get the mail for her," Dr. Rando said.

As the reality of death sinks in, it is common for the bereaved to slip into depression. Even if you are normally a committed, caring person, you could find that you don't care about anything or anyone.

You may also feel helpless and childlike. Dr. Rando points out that when you lose someone close, you also experience "secondary losses" that accrue because of the death. A woman who is widowed, for example, didn't just lose her husband. She lost a friend, a confidant, someone to take vacations with, someone to help take care of the kids."

THESE SECONDARY losses can leave you feeling confused and panicky. For this reason, you should avoid making any major decisions; try to postpone them until you can think more clearly and have a better idea of how your life is going to change.

Another common reaction among grievers is preoccupation with the person who died. You may think about him or her constantly, re-create the circumstances of the death over and over in your mind, have dreams or nightmares about the person — you may even think you see or hear the deceased.

Many people are surprised and frightened by the intensity of these reactions.

"Grief feels like craziness to the person who's undergoing it," Dr. Rando explained, but it's important to realize that, bizarre as they may seem, these reactions are normal.

The mental strain of grief can take a physical toll, as well. It's not unusual for the bereaved to lose weight, experience difficulty sleeping, become irritable or listless or feel short of breath. Grief has even been known to cause hair loss.

How can you overcome the problems of grief? You must first recognize that grief is necessary, and that is something you must work through. As Dr.



Grollman said, there is no shortcut through grief.

"unresolved grief" several months later.

ONE OF THE BEST ways to begin working through grief is to attend the funeral. A funeral confirms the reality of death and serves as a focus for expressing feelings of loss. Funerals also stimulate mourners to begin talking about the deceased, one of the first steps toward accepting the death.

Dr. Edgar Jackson, a psychologist who has written several books on death and the grieving process, says that people who don't attend the funeral of a loved one because they want to deny the death often suffer from

Both before and after the funeral, it is important that you express your feelings. Take time to cry, and don't be afraid to share your tears with other mourners. Talk openly with family members and friends.

Don't try to "protect" other family members by hiding your sadness; it helps them as much as it does you. Express your anger if you are feeling it. This is the time to lean on your friends.

They may feel awkward for a while

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