



Victim Services of Waterloo Region

Fact Sheet on Grief and Bereavement

How we Cope

We all have many different methods to relieve grief and bereavement. Whether a loved one passes suddenly or there is advanced warning, the situation is still traumatic and painful.

Experiencing Grief

There are numerous feelings that people experience during the grieving process while coming to terms with a loss, though there is not a fixed timeline or symptom list. Some examples of grieving are:

- ❑ Shock.
- ❑ Numbness.
- ❑ Sadness.
- ❑ Anger.
- ❑ Guilt.
- ❑ Remorse.
- ❑ Resentment.
- ❑ Hearing the deceased's voice/seeing them.
- ❑ Flashbacks to the funeral or the death/scene.
- ❑ Difficulty concentrating.
- ❑ Irrational thoughts.
- ❑ Changes in appetite and sleeping habits.

These emotions may be present for weeks or months. Periods of feeling better may be broken by recurring sadness. Often, though life seems to be returning to normal, it isn't the same normal that it was before the loss. Things have changed forever.

When a loved one suffers from a terminal illness or dementia, the bereavement process can start before their death. Once the death occurs it can bring a sense of relief, and sometimes guilt or remorse about the quality or source of care the spouse received before death.

Grief also comes from life changes following loss.

Coping with Loss

Overcoming grief takes time. Bereavement affects us on emotional, physical and spiritual levels. Grief must be worked through, and it isn't an instantaneous process.

There are practical decisions to consider. Many hesitate to plan for death and are reluctant to talk about it. However, planning can reduce confusion, worry and legal entanglements. Those who work things out in advance, such as funeral details, wills, financial planning, and alternative living arrangements tend to find adjustment to life for the surviving friends and family far easier. Without other hassles present, people are free to focus on healing.

It is also important to have supports in place to help with the transition and grief. Family and friends can form an invaluable network for emotional support and practical help; counseling and support groups are also available.

Remember

- ❑ Each person has the right to grieve in their own way and their own time.
- ❑ Most people return to daily routines after two to four months, but healing often takes longer.
- ❑ Help to deal with grief is available if wanted.
- ❑ Persistent, debilitating grief may require professional help.

Look for ways to air your feelings, putting them in words and sharing them with others will help to validate them – others may feel exactly as you do! Expressing your grief, not minimizing and repressing it, is critical to coping with loss and healing yourself.

Tips for Dealing with Grief

- ❑ There is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to grieve. Grief is different for everyone.
- ❑ Look for help that suits your needs and beliefs: counseling, church, support groups, friends and family, even using the internet (look for respected, trustworthy websites!).
- ❑ If you are still experiencing difficulty after six months it may be time to seek professional help. Persistent difficulties can be an indication of depression.
- ❑ Look for things to help you work through your grief:
 - ❑ Writing in a journal.
 - ❑ Reading books or poetry.
 - ❑ Talking to/writing a letter to the deceased.
 - ❑ Physical activity (e.g. jogging, punching a pillow to relieve frustration).
 - ❑ Talking about the deceased with others who knew them.
- ❑ Put off major life decisions temporarily until you feel ready.
- ❑ Know that grief can revive grief from past losses as well, and seek help if needed.
- ❑ Know that there will be difficult days and make strategies for how to deal with them (e.g. birthdays, anniversaries etc.).
- ❑ Let others know they can help, and accept help when offered.

Tips for Helping Loved Ones

- ❑ Don't rush them; let them work at their own pace.
- ❑ Offer practical assistance: make a casserole, watch the kids, walk the dog, etc. Don't stop helping once the funeral is over!
- ❑ Bad support *is worse* than no support. Don't tell them to "Move on" or "Put it behind you".

- ❑ Continue to invite the person to social events, even if they refuse at first.
- ❑ Take cues from the person to determine if talking about the deceased would be appropriate. Don't refuse if they would like to.
- ❑ Use phrases like "I'm here if you need to talk" or "I'll call tomorrow to see if you want to talk".
- ❑ Don't use phrases like "They're with God now" or "Call me if you need anything".

Grief vs. Depression

While grieving does not adhere to a schedule, there are times when it can move past grief and become depression. If after six months you are unable to function with day-to-day living, it is time to look for help. Signs of depression include:

- ❑ Marked change in appetite and sleep patterns.
- ❑ Lack of interest or pleasure in things once enjoyed.
- ❑ Feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness.
- ❑ Inability to concentrate.
- ❑ Irrational or obsessive thoughts.
- ❑ Suicidal thoughts.

Initially, these feelings can be considered normal, but if they persist - seek help. There is no shame in obtaining help for depression, a medical illness. Counselors who specialize in grief can be found in the phone book, through the funeral home, or through referrals from social agencies such as Victim Services of Waterloo Region.

It may also be beneficial to visit your family doctor, who can determine whether it is in fact depression and can refer you to a psychiatrist, prescribe you medication, or suggest lifestyle, behavioural and thought process changes to help jump start the healing process.

Things may never be "the same" as they were before the loss, but with time and help things can improve - and life **can** go on.



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