

# Grief and Loss

Grief is a normal response to a loss in of life. Losses include, but are not limited to, the deaths of family and friends, breakups and separations, moving away from home, or graduating from college. Grief reactions are common after the loss of anything or anyone whom you valued. Moreover, grief reactions vary widely among people. Each person has his or her own way of facing loss, and there is no "right way" to grieve.

## Reactions to Loss

- Common first reactions to a loss, particularly an unexpected loss, are feelings of disbelief, shock, and emotional numbness. You may feel that the loss "just can't be true", or that your life seems somehow unreal. These reactions allow for time to absorb and make sense of a painful situation.
- Anger is also a common reaction to grief, and often results from feeling powerless and helpless around the loss. You may feel that a loss was unjust, premature, or untimely; or feel outraged and undeserving of the emotional pain and anguish resulting from the loss.
- Feelings of remorse or guilt are also common reactions to grief. These feelings may emerge from unreasonably believing that you could have prevented the loss, or that you somehow contributed to the loss.
- Other reactions include feeling sad, depressed, unresolved, desperate, panicked, anxious, or overwhelmed.
- Additionally, the stress endured during grief may produce physical symptoms such as nausea, headaches, sore muscles, fatigue, insomnia, and loss of appetite. If you are experiencing these, or other physical symptoms, be sure to see a physician for a more thorough evaluation.

Again, people vary widely with respect to the degree that they grieve. Some people feel the impact of a loss immediately, while others may not feel the impact until months or years afterwards. Some people move through the grieving process fairly quickly, while others may grieve on and off for months, or even years. However, when people are able to move through the various phases of grief (disbelief, shock, anger, sadness, etc.), and experience and integrate the array of feelings tied to the loss, they are often able to finally accept the loss, and move on into new phases of their lives.

## How to Help Someone Who is Grieving

- Realize the uniqueness of a person's grief, keeping in mind that losses affect people differently. A person's grief reaction may be influenced by many factors, including his or her culture, gender, or life circumstances; as well as his or her relationship to the deceased person and the circumstances surrounding the loss.

Try to be patient and understanding towards situations and feelings different than your own.

- Be a good, attentive listener, and show that you care by listening to what the grieving person is saying about his or her feelings and beliefs. Use an appropriate caring conversational tone of voice.
- Try to talk openly and honestly about the loss or situation, unless the grieving person indicates that he or she is not ready or able to do this.
- When appropriate, share your feelings and talk about any similar experiences you may have had. However, avoid using the phrase, "I know just how you feel."
- Bear in mind the grieving person's state of mind prior to the loss, as people who feel emotionally vulnerable before a loss will have a more difficult time dealing or coping afterwards.
- Don't try to talk a person out of his or her grief with statements such as "you must be strong" or "look how much you have." These types of statements often leave a person feeling ashamed about his or her feelings and reactions to loss. Alternatively, convey your support and willingness to listen and understand.
- Take into account how difficult it may be for you to listen to someone else's painful experiences. Try to be mindful of your own ability to be supportive.
- Encourage a person dealing with a loss to care for him or herself, and in particular, not neglect his or her physical needs. You may also want to encourage him or her to postpone major decisions, since grief can often cloud a person's ability to see things clearly.

## **When to Seek Additional Help:**

- If a grieving person feels "stuck" or unable to move beyond his or her grief, the help of a psychotherapist or counselor would be advisable.
- Therapy is also advisable when a person is having trouble sleeping or eating.
- A person who is suicidal, having suicidal thoughts, or contemplating any type of self-harm should see a therapist immediately.
- All of these problems may be signs that grief has shifted towards depression, a condition that calls for evaluation by a professional.

## **Saint Mary's College Resources:**

<a href="#">Counseling Center</a>	x4364
<a href="#">Campus Ministry</a>	x4366
Contra Costa Grief Counseling Hotline	925-944-0645
Contra Costa Crisis Hotline	925-472-0999

## **Other Resources**

Coryell, D. M. (1997). *Good Grief: Healing Through the Shadow of Loss*. The Shiva Foundation

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

Kushner, H. (1981). *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. New York: Schocken Books

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

Rando, T. (1991). *How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies*. New York, Bantam

Staudacher, C. (1987). *Beyond Grief: a Guide for Recovering from the Death of a Loved One*. New Harbinger Publications: Oakland, CA.

Tatelbaum, J. (1984). *The Courage to Grieve*. Perennial Books: NY.

Westberg, G. (1962). *Good Grief*. Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Press.

## **Websites with more information:**

State University of New York at Buffalo: <http://ub-counseling.buffalo.edu/Grief>

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign:  
<http://www.couns.uiuc.edu/Brochures/grief.htm>

www.psycom.net: <http://www.psycom.net/depression.central.grief.html>