



## Grieving is a process; tasks can help work through it

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"It's been five weeks since your husband passed away. It's time you got over it and moved on with your life."

Statements like this, often coming from well-intentioned friends or family, do not accurately reflect the reality of grief. In observing what might be considered normal grief, two things become apparent.

First, anyone who lives and especially if they dare to love, will experience loss that leads to grief. Second, everyone who grieves does so in his own unique way at his own pace. There is no cut-and-dry schedule for recovery.

While a person generally can be expected to experience some emotional healing after about six months, everyone has his own timetable for moving through the process.

Grieving does not follow a stable, step-by-step progression in a predictable, sequential way from one level to another. Rather it is more likely to involve moving back and forth between two conditions, or experiencing several of them simultaneously.

While some people seem to quickly re-enter an almost normal way of life, it may take others years to begin to function in a normal way.

Because the list of normal grief reactions is so extensive and varied, these responses can be described under four general categories: feelings, physical sensations, cognitions, and behaviors.

- Feelings may include sadness,

anger, guilt and self-reproach, anxiety, loneliness, fatigue, helplessness, shock, yearning, numbness and relief.

- Physical sensations can involve weakness, lack of energy, dry mouth, a "hollowness" in the stomach, tightness in the chest or throat, oversensitivity to noise and breathlessness.
- Cognitions may include disbelief (especially in the early stages of grieving), confusion and difficulty concentrating, preoccupation, dreams of the deceased, a sense of his presence and experiences that seem like hallucinations.
- Behaviors may include sleep disturbance, appetite changes, absent-mindedness, social withdrawal, avoiding reminders of the deceased, searching and calling out, sighing, restless over-activity, crying and treasuring objects that belonged to the deceased.

Everyone grieves in his own way, but you cannot walk around the perimeter of loss; you must go through the center, through grief's core, in order to continue your own life in a meaningful way.

After one sustains a loss there are certain tasks that must be accomplished for the process to be completed:

- Accept the reality of the loss: It is normal when faced with a death for a person to react with shock, disbelief and denial. Accepting the loss takes time because it involves not only an intellectual acceptance but an emotional one.
- Work through the pain of grief: It is necessary to experience the pain in order to get the grief work done. Anything that continually allows the

person to avoid or suppress this pain can be expected to prolong the healing.

- Adjust to the environment in which the deceased is missing: This means different things to different people, depending on the relationship with the deceased, and the various roles the deceased played. Not adapting to the loss means that people work against themselves by promoting their own helplessness, by not developing the skills they need to cope or by withdrawing from the world and not facing up to life requirements.
- Emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life: This does not mean forget about the deceased, but find an appropriate place for the dead in emotional lives — a place that enables you to go on living effectively in the world.

Here are some activities that can help in the grief process.

- Participate in the wake and funeral: While these events may be exhausting and emotionally draining, they can bring in the support of friends and community, and provide an opportunity for a last, loving tribute, a public declaration of love.
- Accept the grief: Do not try to be brave; allow yourself to cry.
- Talk about it: Share your grief within the family. Do not attempt to protect them by silence. Find a friend to talk with, someone who will listen without passing judgment. If possible find someone, or a group, who has experienced a similar sorrow.

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- Take care of yourself: Eat well, exercise regularly and get adequate sleep.
- Develop a memorial: Find your own way to memorialize your loved one. Some plant a tree or develop a memorial garden. Others take flowers to the cemetery regularly. Some light a candle at the dinner table on holidays.
- Record your thoughts in a journal.
- Turn grief into creative energy: If circumstances allow, find a way to help others. Keep busy — but also allow yourself quiet time.
- Accept your understanding of the death: Deal with any anger or guilt.

Many people dread events such as holidays, anniversaries and birthdays. At these times especially you will want to use as much support and coping skills as you can muster.

You may find it difficult to believe that the majority of people who experience loss eventually are able to say, "Even though it will never be the same, it is going to be OK."

Please remember to seek professional help if you or a loved one is unable to cope with such loss.

Trained professionals are available in our community to provide assistance and help you work through this difficult time.

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