



**University
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NHS Foundation Trust

Staff Psychological Support Service

Managing Grief

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Grief

Grief is a multi-layered response to loss, and in particular to the loss of someone or something that has died, to whom you had an affectional bond. As well as the emotional response to loss, grief also has physical, cognitive, behavioural, social, cultural, spiritual, and philosophical dimensions.

Coping with Grief

Coping with losing a loved one is one of life's great difficulties. If you have experienced the pain of mourning, you know what it means to try and find ways to ease the pain of the loss. It is important to note that whilst our knowledge and study of grief continues to evolve, not everyone grieves in the same way. We will have individual patterns and different outlets for grief. There has been research on 5 stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance; however, people do not always experience these stages in any particular order, and some may not experience every stage. It is also important to remember, we do not enter and leave each individual stage in a linear fashion. We may enter one stage, then another and slide between stages. Some people may suffer increased guilt around their loss, especially if the relationship was difficult. In the worst cases of grief, there are those individuals who suffer severe grief, known as prolonged grief/complex grief and formerly complicated grief, which can last for months or even years and can also be delayed for a significant period of time. This form of grief can pave the way to isolation and chronic loneliness.

The Five Stages of Grief

Denial

Denial helps us to survive the lost loved one/thing. In this stage, the world becomes meaningless and feels overwhelming. Life makes no sense. We are in a state of shock and denial. We are left wondering if and how we can go on living and why we should go on with our lives. We try to find ways to just get through each day. It is this phase of denial that helps us to pace our grieving process. This is nature's way of allowing us to cope, letting in as much as we can handle without overwhelming us. As we begin to accept the reality of our loss, we start the healing process. As we move through our denial, we then begin to notice all the feelings we had been denying start to surface.

Anger

Be willing to feel your anger, even though it may seem endless. The more we truly feel it, the more it will begin to dissipate and the more we will heal. There are many other emotions layered beneath the anger and we will get to them in time, but anger can be the emotion we are most used to managing. The truth is that anger has no limits. It can extend to our doctors, nurses, colleagues, family, friends, yourself and your loved one who died. We may even question our faith/religion at this point, possibly feeling abandoned. Underneath anger is pain, your pain. It is natural to feel deserted and abandoned, but we live in a society that fears anger. Anger is strength and it can be an anchor, giving temporary structure to the nothingness of loss. We usually know more about suppressing anger than feeling it. The anger is just another indication of the intensity of your love.

Bargaining

You might try to bargain, *“I will never be angry at my husband again if you’ll just let him live.”* After a loss, bargaining might take the form of a temporary truce *“What if I stop smoking, drinking, cursing for the rest of my life - then will I be able to wake up and realise this is just a nightmare?”* We can become lost in *“If only...”* or *“What if...”* statements. We want life to return to how it used to be, we want our beloved to return to us restored we want to turn back time. Guilt often accompanies the bargaining stage. The *“if only...”* statements can lead us to be self-critical, we didn’t do enough, we think we could have done things differently, maybe done more. We may even bargain with the pain. We will do anything to not feel the pain of our loss. We get stuck in the past, trying to negotiate our way out of the hurt. You might feel that these five stages last weeks or months. It is useful to note that the stages are responses to feelings that can last for seconds, minutes or hours as we dip in and out of one and then another.

Depression and low mood

After bargaining, our attention moves into the present. A feeling of emptiness prevails and grief envelopes our lives deeper than we could have imagined. This depressive stage feels as though it will last forever. It’s important to understand that this depression is not a sign of mental illness. It is the appropriate response to a great loss. We withdraw from life, we feel alone wrapped in a cloak of sadness, wondering, perhaps, if there is any point in going on alone? Why go on at all? Depression after a loss can often seen as unnatural, a state to be fixed, something to snap out of or get on with. The loss of a loved one is a very emotional situation, and depression is a normal and appropriate response. If grief is a process of healing, then depression is one of the many necessary steps along the way.

Acceptance

Most people don't ever feel the same after the experience of losing a loved one. This stage is about accepting the reality that our loved one is physically gone and accepting that this new reality is the permanent reality.

We learn to live with it. We must try to live now in a world where our loved one is missing. Acceptance for some of us might be having more good days than bad ones as we move through our grief. As we begin to live once more and start to enjoy our life again, we often feel that we are betraying the one who has passed on. Guilt may surface.

We know that we can never replace what has been lost, but we can form new connections, create new meaningful relationships and new inter-dependencies. Instead of denying our feelings, we listen to our needs; we move, we change, we grow, we evolve. We may start to reach out to others and become involved in their lives once more. We invest in our friendships and in our relationship with ourselves. We begin to live again, but we cannot do so until we have given our grief its time.

Resources

[UHSussex - Health and Wellbeing](#)

[Cruse - Understanding grief](#)

[Grief.com - The five stages of grief](#)

[Psychology Today - Grief, the basics](#)