

Dealing with the loss of a loved one

The death of a loved can be a devastating and painful experience.

Even though it's a natural part of life, losing someone can feel complicated and confusing. And with social distancing right now, it's changing how we say goodbye. Many of us can't visit loved ones in the hospital. We can't say goodbye in person. And we might not be able to attend a funeral.

Today's podcast is intended to walk you through what you might experience and give you tips to cope.

Let's start out by first talking about grief itself.

Grief is more than just a feeling. It's a process. It happens over time. And the way you think and feel can change from day to day, hour to hour, or even moment to moment.

This is part of what makes grief so hard. It's unpredictable. So you might feel fine one moment and then the next, you're overwhelmed with sadness, anger and confusion. The reactions can come in tidal waves, making you feel totally out of control. Or they can hit you out of the blue, when you start to think you're doing better. This is totally normal.

Grief can also affect every aspect of your life. It can affect you emotionally, psychologically, socially, physically, and spiritually. Let's dive into some common grief responses so you can better understand them.

- **Emotionally**, you may feel shocked and upset and vulnerable. And it's not uncommon for people to feel angry at the person for dying. Or angry at others for not protecting him or her. You may also feel guilty that you're still alive while your loved one is not. These are all common feelings.
- **Psychologically**, you may be in denial at first. It can take time to accept that the person is really gone. Grief takes a lot of mental energy. It can be hard to focus and think clearly. So it's good to delay big decisions in the time right after a loss.
- **Socially**, it's not uncommon for some people to withdraw after a loss, while others feel the need to connect. These responses are unique to each person. But remember, even if you choose to stay to yourself for a little while, social supports can help you heal from your loss.

- **Physically.** Many people see changes in their appetite or sleep habits right after a loss. You may have other symptoms or even feel sick, like with headaches or nausea. These usually resolve on their own after a couple of weeks.
- **Spiritually.** If you're spiritual or religious, you may find yourself questioning your beliefs about a higher power or the world in general.

Now, you've probably heard about the stages of grief. But as we mentioned, grief doesn't like to be predictable. So you may find yourself going through these experiences in your own way. It may not go in order. And you might bounce around between stages or go through them repeatedly.

Many people experience shock and denial when they first learn that someone has died. When you heard about your loved one, you may have thought, "No way. It can't be." Or "There was some mistake."

It's difficult to accept the death of someone you were close to or saw every day. And denial may be nature's way of buffering you from feeling the loss all at once. You may feel numb during this time. And it can be hard to follow a normal daily routine if you're in this stage.

Eventually, denial makes way for feelings. For example:

- You may feel sad and lonely or a sense of emptiness.
- You might feel angry at others or yourself or the world.
- Or you might feel guilt or regret about things you said or did while the person was alive. You may find yourself thinking, "If only..." and replaying different memories in your head
- If the person had been ill for a long time or was suffering, some people may feel a sense of relief.
- If the person's death was unexpected or it involved a traumatic event, you may find your beliefs are challenged.
- If you were unable to be with the person at the time of their death or you're not able to grieve the way you want, such as with a funeral, you may feel anger or guilt
- And many people feel anxious about the future and what will happen after someone passes away
- While others search for meaning, trying to understand why a loss happened.

Now you may feel some of these feelings, all of them, or none at all. You might even experience several of them at the same time.

For some people, the loss of a loved one can even bring up their past experiences. They may be flooded with all the feelings from past losses while they're trying to cope with this one. And this can make their feelings even more confusing.

This period of grieving can last anywhere from a few weeks to several months as you work through your loss. But eventually, the pain begins to lessen. The roller coaster slows down. And the good days start to outnumber the bad ones. If you're working through your grief in a healthy way, you'll eventually find a "new normal."

At this point, you're starting to move into acceptance. You begin to figure out what it means to have a "new normal." Maybe you have new routines. Life is different than it was before.

This looks like accepting that you won't be the same as you were before your loved one passed away. But you're okay. And you may even be stronger in some ways. You might let yourself feel good about feeling good again or looking forward toward the future.

Here's the thing, we all make our way through grief a little differently. No two people will experience grief the same way. One person might cry while the other doesn't. The way you grieve is as unique to you as your relationship was with your loved one. Your grief may be affected by the circumstances of your loss, how much support you have, your cultural background and your beliefs.

Healing takes time. Typically, the first year after a loss is the hardest. But you'll likely find that some days, like anniversaries or holidays or certain dates bring up strong feelings long after you pass the one-year mark.

And as much as you might want to, you can't rush your healing. Besides, rushing through grief would be unfair to your needs and would dishonor your feelings about the significance of your loss. And here's another thing, we know that trying to push away feelings actually makes them last longer.

Grief isn't just hard on your mind. It can take a toll on your body. But there are practical things you can do in your daily life to help you take care of your physical health. Here are some suggestions:

- **Get plenty of sleep.** Grief can be exhausting. Be sure you're getting enough rest. You may need more sleep during the first couple of weeks after your loss.
- **Exercise.** Working out may be the last thing you want to do. But moving your body can help you heal. Try going for walks, doing yoga or activities you've enjoyed in the past.

- **Eat well.** People who are grieving often overeat or skip meals. Take time to feed your body. Even if you're not hungry, eat small, healthy meals.
- It may be tempting, but try to **avoid unhealthy ways of coping.** Misuse of alcohol or drugs may create new problems for you and can complicate the grieving process.
- You may also want to do things that help you feel more in control, these may include: Maintaining as normal a schedule as possible or structuring your time and staying busy.

But what about those unpredictable feelings? Remember that what you resist, persists. So as much as you might want to avoid your feelings or act like everything is okay, it's important to let yourself feel.

But while many of us are experts at avoiding our feelings with things like binge watching TV, social media, spending money, or food or alcohol, You were probably never taught how to actually feel your emotions. Here are some ideas:

- **Give yourself permission to feel sad** and share your feelings with others.
- **Allow yourself to feel.** So we already kind of covered this one but it's so important, we're going to keep saying it. Let yourself feel whatever you feel. Try not to judge your feelings. You may even want to set up "grief time." Think about the person and let your feelings come during a scheduled time. This can help you feel like you have more control over your feelings during the rest of the day.
- **If you have recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks about your loved one, know this is totally normal.** Don't try to fight them. They'll decrease over time and become less painful.

Allowing feelings helps you move through them. But it's not always enough. Here are some ways to cope during this hard time:

- **Keep a journal.** Writing down your feelings can be therapeutic. Writing your feelings down helps you get them out. You can say whatever you want without judgment. And this will allow you to work through your grief and feel better.
- **Reach out and talk to people.** Some grieving is best done in private. But friends, family and coworkers may help you feel less adrift during this time. Even if you can't be together in person, it's important to connect. So use phone or video chat to get support from friends and family and find out how they're doing.

- **Find a support group.** You're not alone. Many people are losing loved ones right now. You can also find online grief support groups. Talking with others with similar experiences and sharing your story can help.
- **Talk about your loss.** Friends and family and other coworkers may be afraid that talking about your loss will upset you. Bring up the person in conversation. Share your memories. This lets others know it's okay to talk about the deceased.
- **Ask for help.** Grief is normal and healthy. But if you're feeling "stuck" in your grief after several weeks, don't be afraid to reach out for professional help.

And remember, you're not the only one going through this. Your friends and family are likely grieving too. So how can you support them? Many of us are worried about saying or doing the wrong thing. But the very best thing you can do is let them be sad and upset. Don't try to fix it by saying things like, "It could have been worse." All you have to do is:

- Ask them how they're doing
- Spend time with them or give them private time, depending on what they need
- Listen without judgement
- And don't take their anger or other feelings personally

Remember that grieving looks different for each person. So you may feel confused or judgmental about how others respond.

But there is no "right" or "wrong" way to grieve. Your reactions are determined by many factors. The circumstances surrounding the death, cultural values, religious beliefs, life experiences and traditions all may affect your experience of grief.

As you move forward, remember that others have gone through significant losses before you and have grown from the experience.

Even if you aren't able to have a funeral or be with loved ones in person right now, you can still honor the memory of your loved one. For example:

- Make a donation to a favorite charity.
- Write a poem
- Plant a tree

- Create a photo album
- Write a goodbye letter
- Or share memories through social media

Let yourself heal. Remember to take your time. Don't judge or measure your reactions by those of others.

Finally, remember that grieving is a part of life, but it's also work. The only way to get through it is to go through it. And loss isn't something you "get over." Instead, it's something that may change you.

If you're having trouble coping with a loss, know that you're not alone. We're here for you 24/7. Call us anytime.

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