

Understanding and Coping with Grief, Loss and Tragedy

There can be a range of responses to loss, and listed below are some typical reactions that you may be experiencing personally or may recognize in others. These responses are all considered part of normal human reactions to loss.

Physical Reactions

Fatigue/exhaustion
Sleep disturbance
Underactivity/over activity
Change in appetite
Digestive problems
Nightmares
Muscle tremors/twitches
Headaches
Startle reactions

Cognitive Reactions

Difficulty concentrating
Difficulty solving problems
Preoccupation with the loss
Difficulty making decisions
Memory disturbance
Revenge fantasies
Lowered attention span
Fears about one's own mortality
Denial

Emotional Reactions

Guilt
Feelings of helplessness
Emotional numbing
Emotional sensitivity
Fear/anxiety
Sense of hopelessness
Hypervigilance
Anger/irritability/blame
Moodiness

Where there is little anyone can do to take away these difficult and uncomfortable feelings, there are several things you can do to help reduce the intensity of distress.

- Keep to your normal routine as much as possible. Engage in consistent self-care practices.
- Accept your responses (and others') as normal human reactions; grief is a universal experience.
- Write a letter to the person you lost; writing can help clear your mind of intrusive thoughts.
- Allow yourself to reflect on positive thoughts and memories of the person you lost.
- Engage in a ritual that honors your loved one and that creates positive memories.
- Use exercise to reduce negative emotions and stress.
- Do not attempt to resist your feelings or numb your emotional pain with drugs or alcohol.
- Reach out to others and spend time with people you trust and cherish.
- Use extra care when driving or engaging in tasks that require close attention and skill.
- Listen carefully when others express their grief. Empathetically acknowledge what they are feeling.
- Be forgiving of friends and family (and yourself!) whose grief may lead them to behave in uncharacteristic ways.
- Give yourself permission to fall apart, feel terrible, or cry; grief often comes in waves.
- Consider meditation or prayer, as well as using art or music to express feelings when words fail you.
- Use the loss to help you clarify your values and focus on what is important to you.

When someone dies their loss affects many people. Try not to pass judgment on others' reactions, especially if they are different from your own. For some people a tragic event can trigger feelings and memories associated with other traumatic events in their lives. Family and friends might experience conflict resulting from the following:

- Differences in opinion about how grief should be expressed
- Beliefs about who is "entitled" to grieve based on closeness of the relationship with the person who died
- Differences in how quickly friends or family members appear to recover from the loss
- Unresolved conflicts with the person who died

When speaking with someone who is grieving:

- Express your concern. Example: *"I'm so sorry to hear that this happened to you."*
- Be genuine in your communication and don't hide your feelings. Example: *"I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care."*
- Offer to be helpful in concrete ways rather than as a general statement (*"I'm happy to sit with you while you do homework so you're not alone."* vs. *"Let me know if there's anything I can do."*). Follow through with this and repeat your offers!
- Listen in a non-judgmental manner and let them tell their story as many times as they need/want to.
- Allow periods of silence – offer silent support – be a good listener. Don't pressure them to get over their grief.
- Don't avoid the deceased person's name. If you knew the deceased person, it's ok to talk about what you loved and miss about them.

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