

### **Coping with Grief**

#### **Do all people grieve the same way?**

Many people have grief reactions that are similar. Yet, grief is very individual. The way you grieve will be influenced by many things, such as who/what you have lost, how a death occurred, your personality, culture, age, gender, other stressors in your life, and how satisfied you are with the support you receive from others. There is no right or wrong way to grieve (as long as you do not hurt yourself or others).

#### **What are some common grief reactions?**

You might have one reaction, several, or many. They might be very strong for a while and then lessen, or they might not be as strong but last for a long time.

#### **Actions:**

- Trouble falling asleep or waking up too early
- Eating too much or too little
- Being absent-minded
- Withdrawing from others; feeling less interested in the world
- Dreaming of the deceased
- Searching and calling out the name of the deceased person
- Sighing
- Being restlessly overactive
- Crying
- Visiting places or carrying objects that remind you of the deceased person
- Strongly treasuring objects that belonged to the deceased

#### **Emotions:**

- Sadness
- Anger
- Guilt or regret
- Anxiety
- Loneliness
- Fatigue
- Helplessness
- Shock
- Yearning (pining for the person; thinking “if only” this had not happened)
- Emancipation (not all feelings are negative; sometimes there is a sense of being released when a loss occurs)
- Relief (May especially be felt after someone dies from a lengthy or painful illness or if your relationship with the deceased was a difficult one)
- Numbness (a lack of feeling; this may actually protect you from a flood of feelings occurring at the same time)

### Thoughts:

- Disbelief (thinking the loss did not happen)
- Confused thinking, difficulty concentrating
- Preoccupation, obsessive thoughts about the deceased or what was lost
- Sensing the presence of the deceased, thinking the deceased is still there
- Hallucinations, seeing and/or hearing the deceased

### Feelings in the body:

- Hollowness in the stomach
- Tightness in the chest and/or throat
- Oversensitivity to noise
- Feeling that nothing is real, maybe even feeling that you are not real yourself
- Breathlessness, feeling short of breath
- Muscle weakness
- Lack of energy
- Dry mouth

### Spirituality

- Feeling like you have lost direction in life
- Searching for meaning in the loss
- Questioning your religious or spiritual beliefs

### **How long does it last?**

- Length of time it takes to adjust to a loss is different for each person and each circumstance
- Usually takes longer than people think
- You will cope with many new experiences during the first year without the deceased person and the second year may also be difficult as the loss becomes more real
- Be gentle with yourself and allow as much time as needed to adjust
- Grief comes in waves
- Sometimes you will feel upset and heartbroken and other times you will feel content and enjoy many things
- In time, you can learn to live your life fully and happily despite the loss
- Grief reactions pop up from time to time, even after many years, and is very common

### **What are some ways to do this grief work and cope with my loss?**

- Healthy lifestyle (getting enough sleep, eating a good balance of healthy foods, avoid using alcohol and unprescribed drugs for relief, exercise)
- Support from family and friends (do not hesitate to accept and ask for support and help)
- Rituals (an activity that is done to remember and honor the person who died)
- Writing or journaling (helps you to express your feelings and the importance of your loss)

- Forgiving (when an unexpected death can leave you with “unfinished business” with the deceased)
- Nature (spending time outdoors can be soothing and healing)
- Books (many books have been written on coping with grief, some by authors who have gone through their own grief journeys)
- Massage (to release tension or pain in your muscles from “holding onto grief”)
- Acknowledge, Accept and Let out your feelings
- Make needed adjustments (keep a flexible attitude with a willingness to adapt and change)
- Embrace the memories (Death ends a life, but it doesn’t end a relationship)
- Prepare for special occasions (plan ahead when grief can be especially intense and do what feels right for you)
- “Coping ugly” (doing what you need to get through and survive)

### **What should I do if I do not feel better over time?**

Some people do not feel better as time goes on and may even feel worse and have trouble functioning in their daily lives. If this describes you, seek help from a professional who will determine if you might be experiencing complicated grief, depression, or posttraumatic stress disorder. If you are having thoughts of suicide, seek help right away. There are caring professionals available who can help you cope with this difficult time in your life.

- *Complicated grief* (when you are having difficulty moving beyond Task II and/or if you are grieving multiple losses)
- *Depression* (an illness with some symptoms similar to grief; if you are depressed and receive treatment for it, you will be better able to do the grief work necessary to cope with your loss.
- *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder* (you could have PTSD if the circumstances of your loss were violent or shocking in some way; you might have recurring recollections of the death (or loss) that are very disturbing)

### **Where can I go for help if I need it?**

- Primary care practitioner
- Grief counselor
- Mental health professional
- Spiritual leader
- And of course, the Employee Assistance Program here at UT

### **Where can I find more information?**

Austin Center for Grief and Loss <https://www.austingrief.org/>

Hospice Foundation of America’s Grief Resource Page <http://www.hospicefoundation.org/griefandloss>

AARP Grief and Loss Resources <http://www.aarp.org/relationships/grief-loss/>

GriefNet.org is an internet community of persons dealing with grief, death, and major loss [www.griefnet.org](http://www.griefnet.org)

Refuge in Grief <https://refugeingrief.com/>