

How to help yourself and others in times of grief

Emotional responses to loss include numbness, loneliness, sadness and anger

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Grief affects us all at one time or another in our lives – whether it be due to the death of a loved one or some other form of loss.



“It is a normal emotion we feel as a response to loss,” says Claire Collins, a bereavement coordinator with Marie Curie (www.mariecurie.org.uk).

“Throughout our lives we experience many different types of loss, such as relationship breakdowns, redundancy, financial, health and the death of a loved one.

“These losses can often lead to a further series of losses.”

WHAT ARE THE COMMON SYMPTOMS OF GRIEF?

“Many symptoms of grief can be experienced after the loss of a loved one,” says Claire. “The emotional responses include shock, numbness, denial, isolation, loneliness, sadness, anger, despair, emptiness, helplessness, fear and anxiety.

“We cannot ‘see’ these emotions, but there may be more obvious physical symptoms such as disrupted sleep (sleeping more or inability to sleep), loss of appetite, tearfulness, lethargy, panic attacks, increased susceptibility to colds and illness. These responses to loss are normal and do not last forever.

“Our social context can also be affected as social circles may change, finances and housing may be impacted by the loss. Spiritually, we may experience a crisis in faith or a struggle to find meaning, both a meaning in life and a meaning in death.”

DOES EVERYONE EXPERIENCE GRIEF IN THE SAME WAY?

“No is the answer,” says Claire. “Grief is completely unique to each individual. Everyone grieves differently, even within one family or a couple, a fact which can have an impact on relationships.

“There is no right way or wrong way to grieve, no set pattern and no set timeframe. Its symptoms change as we learn to live without the person who has died. Sometimes grief can be complicated due to historical losses, difficult relationships with the deceased or the circumstances of the death, for example sudden death, death after a long illness, suicide or murder.

“Migration and leaving behind our country of origin can also involve the losses of family and friends, history and cultural heritage and this can also impact on our grieving process.”

WHAT ARE THE COMMON STAGES OF GRIEF?

“Much has been written about the stages or tasks of grief by researchers such as Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, Colin Murray Parkes and J William Worden,” says Claire.

“They speak about how the loss of a loved one is often followed by feelings of shock, denial and numbness which can move into an acceptance of the loss as we get back into life’s daily activities such as work, social circles and meeting new people. Life gradually becomes fuller and we are able to think fondly about our loved ones without becoming overwhelmed by grief.”

WHAT ARE THE COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT GRIEF?

“People sometimes feel that the bereaved should be ‘over it’ or ‘moving on’ after a few weeks or months, but there is no set time for grieving,” says Claire.

“There is no magic wand that can take the pain away, it takes time and we can feel as if we are literally ‘going mad’ with grief. This is ‘normal’.

“People experience grief in their own unique way, adults and children, men and women, and it also is important that we acknowledge everyone’s grief, including people with learning disabilities or sufferers of dementia.”

Further information is available from the Palliative Care of People with Learning Disabilities Network at www.pcpld.org

HAVE YOU TIPS FOR SOMEONE EXPERIENCING GRIEF?

“When you’re experiencing a bereavement it is important you look after yourself and eat regularly,” says Claire.

“Try to get out and take some physical exercise if you can.

“Also, try to make some space and time for yourself and to remember your loved one. Plus, remember grieving is ‘normal’ — give yourself time as your grief will change.

“If you are struggling to cope with your feelings, seek further help. Talk to your GP or friends and family who could find assistance for you if needed.”

WHAT ARE THE MAIN DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GRIEF AND DEPRESSION?

“The symptoms of grief mentioned above may be similar to those of depression,” says Claire.

“However, depression usually results in a more ‘constant’ state whereas grieving is triggered by memories or reminders of a loved one.

“There are good days and bad days when we are grieving and eventually these bad days can become bad moments.”