



# Grieving An Unexpected Death

## GRIEF IS...

Grief is a natural process experienced by all people, to one degree or another, after the occurrence of a loss.

Significant losses, such as the death of someone close to you, the breakup of a close relationship/friendship, or the loss of hopes and dreams, are some of life's most stressful occurrences. Grieving is an adaptive response to loss.

## RESPONDING TO AN UNEXPECTED DEATH

Immediately following a significant, unexpected death, most individuals report experiencing a period of numbness or shock. Because an unexpected death is a personal trauma, feelings of sadness, helplessness, horror, vulnerability and fear are common and may be prolonged. In addition, an unexpected death robs you of the opportunity to say goodbye to the person who died. If there were difficulties in the relationship before or at the time of the death, it may be more challenging to work through your feelings.

Most people tend to hold the belief that the world is generally a safe and predictable place. The experience of an unexpected death calls this belief into question. As a result, your confidence in the world may be shaken and you may feel unsafe. Because of the unpredictability and senselessness of this death, you may assume responsibility for what has happened in an attempt to make sense of it. You may also fear that another unexpected loss will occur, and you may withdraw from others in an effort to protect yourself. These responses can compromise your ability to grieve.

For most people, the intense emotional pain of grief will subside as they come to terms with the unfairness of the death. Eventually, energy will be refocused on the future. However, if your grief response does not gradually lessen in intensity or, over time, continues to interfere with your academic, social or occupational functioning, then you may benefit from professional assistance.



**G**rief is unique to each individual. Different people (even members of the same family or work group) experience their grief in different ways.

Grief may be complicated by prior experiences of loss, traumatic events surrounding the loss (e.g., accidental death), a history of difficult relationships, or other personal factors (e.g., lack of social support). It can be especially helpful to seek assistance when a grieving process is complicated by other factors or events.

## WHAT HAPPENS DURING THE GRIEVING PROCESS?

Many people experience some of these common, normal grief reactions:

### THOUGHTS

- disbelief
- confusion
- preoccupation
- thoughts of dying

### BEHAVIOURS

- crying
- social withdrawal
- sleep disturbance
- absent-mindedness
- appetite disturbance
- restless over-activity
- dreams of the deceased
- avoiding going to classes
- treasuring reminders of the lost other

### FEELINGS

- anger
- guilt
- relief
- numbness
- disinterest
- emptiness
- resentment
- anxiety
- sadness
- yearning
- loneliness

### PHYSICAL SENSATIONS

- dry mouth
- chest pain
- lack of energy
- tightness in your throat
- weakness in your muscles
- hollowness in your stomach

## WHERE CAN I GET HELP?

Student Counselling Services (966-4920)

Student Health Services (966-5768)

## WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MYSELF GRIEVE?

- Work to identify and accept all of your feelings about the loss. This is a difficult, yet vital, part of the grieving process.
- Give some form of expression to your feelings. For most people this means talking about the loss. Some individuals feel that this is counterproductive, as it often evokes tears and/or uncomfortable feelings. However, talking about your experience can help you to vent your pain and gradually move forward with your life and accept the finality of the loss.
- Be aware that you need not experience or express your grief in a manner similar to those around you. You are a unique individual with your own way of grieving.
- Reassure yourself that it is normal for feelings to take an “up and down” course. Some people describe experiencing their emotions in “waves” or “bursts” over time. Some days will be better than others.
- Take care of your physical health. Try to eat nutritious meals, get enough rest, and exercise moderately. Avoid excessive use of caffeine.
- Seek assistance with drug and alcohol problems. You may feel that these substances help to numb your feelings of grief. However, any relief you might experience is temporary. Substance abuse can contribute to problems that interfere with the grieving process.
- Accept support. Some individuals believe they need to be “strong” and independent. At a time of significant loss, however, this is an unrealistic expectation. Allow those around you to provide comfort and assistance during this difficult time.
- Seek support. Give yourself permission to ask for the help you need.
- Remember that your loss is not something you need to “get over”. Your life has been changed and will never be quite the same again. You are learning to “live with” the loss.
- Try to be patient. The work of grieving requires time. Gradually, your pain will lessen and there will be more good days than bad. This may occur over the span of weeks, months, even years.
- Remind yourself that healing doesn’t mean forgetting. Memories will remain. You will find a way to adjust.
- Make a conscious decision to get through your grief. Simply allowing the passage of time will not release you from your pain. Time itself does not heal. How you use the time that passes dictates the course of grief.
- Give yourself permission to enjoy life, to laugh and to have fun. Continue to do the things you like to do. Many individuals feel that it is not appropriate or respectful to experience positive emotions during a time of significant loss. However, an important part of recovery involves experiencing all of your feelings, including hope and happiness.
- Recall how you have coped with difficult circumstances in the past. Some of the coping strategies that you have used in the past may be helpful to you now.
- Give yourself credit. Acknowledge your strengths and the ways you do cope.