

Grief and Loss

Grieving is a process we all must experience at some point in our lives. Grieving is more intense when the person who has died is very significant to us, or when the loss is unusual for the stage of life we are in at the time. The death of a parent or a sibling when in college, for example, is an event that most students do not confront nor wish to consider. It may be very difficult for a college student who has suffered such a loss, as friends are likely to have difficulty understanding his or her pain. Though not as significant as the death of an immediate family member, other losses such as the death of a grandparent, friend, or even a pet can also be difficult to cope with in college.

When coping with the death of a loved one, it is normal to experience a range of intense, often overwhelming emotions. Although grieving generally occurs in emotional stages, research has shown that the stages differ for each individual and that there is no “right way” to grieve. People mourn in different ways, depending on personality, gender, life situation, circumstances of the loss, and support from others. Still, there are common emotional, behavioral, and physical reactions that people are likely to experience after a death. It is important to know that these emotional responses are a normal and natural reaction to the loss of someone who was loved. Grief reactions may include any of the following feelings.

Shock and Numbness

The initial reaction to the loss of a loved one is usually a sense of shock or disbelief. Feelings of numbness, confusion and an inability to think or make decisions are common when one learns that someone close has died.

Sadness and Longing

Feelings of sadness, anguish and a yearning to be with the person who has died, are common reactions to the death of a loved one. Grief may occur in “waves” of emotion. Memories, music, shared places or activities, or seeing someone who resembles the loved one in some way may trigger strong feelings.

Experiences of particular beauty, such as nature or springtime, may also bring sadness. It is also normal to become emotional at unexpected, or inconvenient, moments (e.g. walking to class, watching a movie, waiting in line at a store, etc.).

Physical Symptoms

The body often reacts intensely to loss. Physical symptoms such as a hollow feeling in the stomach, constriction in the throat, weakness, or headaches are examples of ways in which one’s body may react to grief.

Depression

Sleep problems, appetite changes, diminished energy, and loss of interest in daily activities are likely to occur after the loss of a loved one. Concentration difficulties, such as being forgetful or absent-minded, or feeling as if one is “in a fog” are also common.

Fear and Anxiety

Anxiety is a typical reaction to losing a loved one. Feeling agitated, restless, or panicky are symptoms of anxiety. It is also common to worry how one will cope with life without the one who has died, or to fear the loss of important others.

Guilt and Self-Reproach

Feelings of guilt, as well as an exaggerated sense of responsibility, often occur during grief. People who are grieving may regret arguments or negative feelings before the person died, or wish they had visited or told the person how much they were loved. When an individual dies from a terminal illness, loved ones may feel guilty for experiencing a sense of relief that the suffering is over. One may feel guilty for continuing to live when the loved one had to die, or for feeling happy or briefly forgetting what has happened.

Feelings of Loneliness and Isolation

Losing a loved one often creates a deep feeling of loneliness. One feels a tremendous void or sense of emptiness, even when with others. It may also seem wrong or unfair that others are going on with life, or seem to be worrying about trivial concerns. Feelings of loneliness may intensify at times when the support of the deceased person is needed, or in anticipation of important life events such as graduation or birthdays.

Anger

It is common to feel angry at others, including those who are coping differently with their grief. One may feel cheated by death, or feel angry at the person for having died. Questioning God and one's faith may occur during the struggle to come to terms with the loss.

Avoiding Feelings

Some people deal with grief by avoiding their feelings or wanting to be alone. This is also a normal response to loss. It may be difficult at times to speak about the death or to accept help from others.

Handling Your Grief

If someone you love has died, it is important to be patient with yourself and to give yourself time for healing. You may feel very different than you used to, and some days will be more difficult than others. It is normal to lose your usual interest in school and social activities. During this time, it is important to pay particular attention to the basic aspects of daily living. Focus on caring for yourself in the most fundamental ways, including eating, getting rest, and engaging in some exercise. You are likely to feel fatigued, so avoid running yourself down with too many responsibilities. You may wish to consider speaking to your professors and/or your academic dean, as it may be important to lighten your workload during this time. Know that you may not do as well in your courses or perform well in other areas after the death of a loved one. Accept help and support from others, particularly those who seem able to listen to your feelings without needing to find a solution. Try to avoid making major decisions during this time, as you are likely to be overly impacted by your emotionality. Also avoid abusing alcohol or drugs, as this will ultimately make coping more difficult.

Because the person you lost was very important to you, the grieving process is never fully “over” and subsequent losses in life may stir up feelings again. It may feel strange at times to feel so completely changed, when many aspects of life seem to go on the same.

Over time, the intensity of grief and distress will diminish as you gradually begin to integrate the loss and adjust to life as it has changed. Life may even deepen in some ways as a result of mourning the person you loved. Your loved one will never be forgotten, but the grieving process helps you to continue on with life while carrying your loved one with you in your heart. Many people find that rituals, either alone or with others (i.e. writing, art, doing activities that honor the person who has died, spiritual practice) help serve as a periodic reminder of the ways in which loved ones have influenced our lives.

For More Information

If you have lost someone who is close to you, speaking with a counselor can help in getting through a very difficult time. Caring, experienced psychologists are available for free and confidential appointments by calling (518) 388-6161 or stopping by the front desk at the Wicker Wellness Center.