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What is grief ?

Throughout our lives, we all have to face change and loss. Sometimes this involves a great deal of emotional pain. It may be difficult to make sense of what is happening. Sometimes loss can undermine our sense of who we are.

The death of someone close may be the most severe form of loss, but other losses can also affect us deeply . Divorce or separation, exam failure, leaving home or university , injury or ill health, the breakdown of a friendship or of a relationship, or the death of a pet, may have deep significance.

Coping with bereavement, or a major loss, can be particularly difficult when you are at campus. Being away from home, at a time when you most need the support of family or friends, may leave you feeling isolated. You may feel that you do not know your new friends at campus sufficiently well to share your feelings. You may think the people around you have not had similar experiences and will not be able to understand. In addition, the pressure of exams and deadlines can seem relentless.

How does grief affect people?

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Grief is not a one-off event but a natural process of adjustment to loss. It is rather like going on a journey that a person does not want to take. He or she may want to get it over and done with and get back to normal but it takes time. People experience a whole range of feelings in response to loss and sometimes worry that they are going mad, but these feelings are normal.

Shock

Sudden, or unexpected, loss may produce a state of shock as a natural anesthetic to insulate against overwhelming pain, or the person may experience:

- Tearfulness
- Physical and emotional pain
- Shivering, sweating and dizziness
- Palpitations and panic.
- Sleep and appetite disturbance.
- Fatigue.

Numbness

He or she may feel numb and may:

- Avoid emotion
- Become withdrawn
- Feel isolated
- Feel unable to think, concentrate or make a decision
- Behave in an irrational way
- Use alcohol or drugs to cope.

Denial

Denial is a normal response to loss and it may pass quickly, or last for a long time. The person may:

- Feel that “It can't be true” and “this is not happening to me”.
- Expect the person who has been lost to return.
- Continue to behave as if nothing has happened.
- Keep busy even to the point of exhaustion.
- Feel that he or she can see or talk with the person who has gone.

Alternatively, he or she may think constantly about the loss.

The grieving process may be delayed, or pushed aside by other life events, only to surface, possibly years after the actual loss, taking the person by surprise.

Anger

A common response to loss or death is anger. “Why didn't someone do more?” “How could they leave me all alone?” “Why me?” this can be very difficult for the person who is feeling angry and for others. But anger is a normal and appropriate response and it can be helpful to talk about these feelings.

Guilt

A person may feel guilty and may be troubled by thoughts of “If only...” these are common feelings for people who are dealing with loss.

Moving on

At the time, the person may feel as if they will never get over it. Gradually, he or she will no longer think constantly about the loss. This, in itself, can feel like a betrayal.

As time passes, anniversaries and milestones in the year become less difficult. There will come a time when he or she may find a place for the person or the loss that allows him or her to get on with life. However, a significant loss or bereavement may produce profound changes in the self, in relationships with others and with the world.

How can you help yourself ?

IF YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED A LOSS OR BEREAVEMENT:

- You may feel vulnerable and accident prone and it can be a relief to have support from family and friends
- There are many people in campus to whom you can turn for support. Contact the appropriate specialist.
- Funerals, rituals or finding some way to say goodbye, may help you accept the reality of the loss
- Allow yourself to feel sad, to talk about it again and again, to weep and to dream. These are all natural ways of making sense of your loss
- If you are having trouble sleeping , don't lie in bed tossing and turning . Get up and make a drink, read, listen to the radio or find something that comforts you
- Ask friends and family for what you want. This may be company , a meal, to be left alone, to talk, to listen, and to just be there. People often don't know what to say or do and they may be glad to have some guidance
- Accept that you will be in emotional turmoil and don't make any major decisions about moving away , giving up your course or ending a relationship, while you are not quite yourself .
- Let your appropriate specialist know if your difficulties are affecting your academic work, so they can help you with arrangements for course work or exams
- There are various organizations providing advice, information and support and there is useful information on the internet and in self-help books.

How can you help someone else?

- Really listening, without interrupting and without trying to offer solutions, is often enough.
- Allow the person to express him or herself . He or she may want to cry or to be angry. This may feel very uncomfortable for you, but try not to distract him or her with forced cheerfulness.
- Ask the person what he or she finds helpful and respect his or her wishes, if this is possible.
- The person may initially reject your offer of help and may seem to be coping well. It often takes time for the effects of loss to hit home, so do not be put off from offering your support again at a later date.
- Loss can take a long time to heal and the immediate rush of attention may quickly fade away, leaving the person feeling abandoned. Small acts of support, sustained over a longer period, may be helpful.
- If the person seems to be stuck in his or her grief , or if you are concerned, you may want to encourage him or her to seek help.
- If the person is talking about suicide, either directly or in vague terms, take it seriously and encourage them to see their GP . If this is not possible, speak to the appropriate specialist. You can also take your friend to the emergency Hospital.

When is specialist help appropriate?

Grief is a natural process and people have tremendous inner resources, which help them to cope with loss and death even in traumatic circumstances. Most people get through with the support of friends and family.

However, you may be away from home or not want to worry people you know or you may feel they can't understand. Perhaps you would simply prefer to talk to someone who is not involved. Occasionally, the grieving process gets stuck and you find you cannot feel anything at all. Maybe the loss rekindles past hurts. You may continue to be intensely distressed long after the event, or continue to have problems with sleeping, with work or relationships, with alcohol or drugs. You might find that you are thinking of suicide as a way out. In these situations, you need to find some help.

There are resources in the campus, where you will find information, advice, support and treatment. Contact the appropriate specialist or Counselors for help.