

Understanding Your Grief

- Grief is a normal yet highly personal response to loss. It is not an illness or pathological condition. It is a natural process in response to loss. Depending on how it is managed and understood, it can lead to healing and personal growth.
- Grief is extremely powerful. It can shake you to your core and knock you off balance. It can be painful beyond words, can change your life completely and can affect you on all different levels of your life.
- Understanding the process and knowing what to expect can help you cope. Your pattern of grieving will most likely be uneven, unpredictable, unique and with no specific timetable. The more you learn about it, the more you can cope with it. When you understand what is happening to you and have some idea of what to expect-you will feel more in control. You will be better able to take care of yourself and be able to find your way through the loss and begin rebuilding again.
- The worst kind of grief is the grief you are experiencing now. Your grief is unique, not like any others, and there is no use comparing. At this moment, your loss is the worst thing that could happen and your loss is worthy of grief.
- Grief work is very hard and takes enormous energy. You can't avoid it, eventually it will catch up with you. The best way out is through. Like a messy chore, it will sit there waiting to be done, the longer it waits, the harder it becomes.

- Effective grieving is not done alone. It is important to have a understanding, nonjudgmental listener. Someone with whom you can openly acknowledge your feelings and experiences, express and work through your pain and come to terms with the loss.
- How grief is expressed varies among individuals. Everyone grieves differently. According to their age, gender, personality, culture, value/belief system, past experience with loss, level of your support system, relationship with the deceased, circumstances surrounding the death and much more.
- Certain manifestations of grief are typical, common and normal. Grief is as individual as you are but some feelings and reactions are universal. The intensity may vary and they will happen in no particular order. You may experience some, all or none of them. Respect your feelings and reactions. Take time to listen, experience and understand them.
- Grief is a lifelong process. Agonizing pain of loss diminishes over time but is never gone completely. It is absolutely normal to feel the aftershock of loss for the rest of your life. Grieving is not a single event, like an illness that can be cured and from which you will recover, it is more like a deep wound that eventually heals and closes, but whose terrible scar remains and still can hurt at times.
- Death may have ended your loved one's life but it did not end your relationship. The bond you have will continue and endure throughout your lifetime, depending on how you take your memories and your past into the future. Many griever report maintaining an active connection with their deceased loved ones by

talking to them, writing to them, memorializing/honoring them in some way and much more. It is healthy and normal to foster these continuing bonds.

- Time does not heal grief. Time is neutral. It is not the passage of time alone that heals. It is what you do with the time that matters. Now that this death has happened to you, you must decide what you can do with your grief. Grieving is an active process, not a passive one, it involves some choice.
- There is no right or wrong way to grieve. There is only your way and you must discover it. There is no magic formula, no short cut, no easy way out. Do what is right and comfortable for you.

Common Grief Reactions(list is not all inclusive)

Physical Reactions:

Fatigue/lack of energy

Body aches/pains

High blood pressure

Shaking

Muscle tension

Blurred Vision

Headaches

Shortness of breath

Stomach distress

Oversensitivity to noise

Erratic sleeping and eating patterns

Dry mouth

Urinary frequency

Aggravation of pre-existing medical conditions

Development of new medical conditions

(note-you should talk about all physical reactions and conditions with your doctor)

Emotional Reactions:

Shock/disbelief/denial

Sadness

Anger

Guilt

Blaming

Irritability/mood changes

Frustration

Anxiety/panic

Some depression/despair

Resentment/bitterness/envy

Hurt/heart broken

Helplessness

Emptiness/loneliness

Relief

Peace

Cognitive Reactions:

Forgetfulness

Repetition

Preoccupation

Confusion

Should/could/would of thoughts

Questioning/doubting thoughts

Behavioral Reactions:

Sobbing/crying

Isolating/avoidance

Dreams/nightmares

Changes in appetite

Decrease in functioning-work, home etc.

Yelling/gasping

Clinging to objects/pining

Changes in sleep

Use of RX meds to cope

Spiritual Reactions:

Re-assessing beliefs/values

Beliefs increase or decrease

Angry at higher power or deepened bond

Confrontation of spiritual questions

Helping Yourself Heal

- Allow yourself to mourn. Someone you love has died. You are now faced with the difficult, but important task of mourning. This is the open expression of your thoughts and feelings regarding the death and the person who has died. It is an essential part of healing.
- Talk about your loss and seek out a positive support system. Express your grief openly by sharing your grief outside of yourself, healing occurs. Ignoring your grief will not make it go away, talking about it often makes you feel better. Allow yourself to speak from your heart, not just your head. Doing so does not mean you are losing control or going “crazy”. This is a normal part of your grief journey. Seek out people who will listen, let you be yourself in your grief and not judge you. Avoid people who are critical or who try to steal your grief from you. If your family and friends can't fill this need, seek out a grief counselor or a support group.
- Expect to feel a multitude of emotions and reactions and allow for these. Grief can be like a roller coaster ride at times, with many ups and downs. It can also be like waves in the lake or ocean. Sometimes you are hit by a big wave of grief, other times a small wave, sometimes you are in the middle of the storm and you are hit by a wave you did not even see coming. Over time, as you begin to heal, the intensity and frequency of these waves will decrease but you may still have a wave hit you sometimes or what is called a grief attack. This is normal and to be expected. Remember at that point you will have accomplished some healing and will come through that wave, you won't be back to square one.

- Be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits. Your feelings of loss will probably leave you fatigued. And your low energy level may naturally slow you down. Respect what your mind and body are telling you. Get rest daily. Eat balanced meals. Lighten your schedule as much as possible. Caring for yourself does not mean you are feeling sorry for yourself, it means you are using healthy survival skills.

- Make use of ritual. The funeral ritual does more than acknowledge the death of someone. It helps provide you with the support of caring people. Most importantly, the funeral is a way for you to express your grief outside of yourself. Rituals can also serve as a way for you to continue the bond with your loved one who has died. Writing to them or journaling in some way, buying or making something, volunteering or donating, all in honor of them or in their memory, family sharing memories, talking with your loved one out loud or through meditation, planting their favorite flowers/tree or making a memory garden, looking at pictures, playing music they liked and many more ways you can be creative. Just because your loved one is no longer physically here anymore, does not mean you can't have a relationship with them, it's just a different one now.

- Embrace your spirituality. If faith is part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. Allow yourself to be around people who understand and support your beliefs. If you are angry at God or a higher power or are questioning, realize this feeling can be a normal part of grief work. Find someone to talk with who won't be critical of whatever thoughts and feelings you need to explore.

- Allow a search for meaning. You may find yourself asking, “why did he/she die”, “why this way”, “why now”. This search for meaning is another normal part of the healing process. Some questions have answers, some do not. Actually, the healing occurs in the opportunity to pose questions, not necessarily in answering them. Find someone who will listen responsively as you search for meaning.
- Treasure your memories. Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after someone loved dies. Treasure them. Share them with your family and friends. Recognize that your memories may make you laugh and cry. In either case, they are a lasting part of the relationship that you had with a very special person in your life.
- Move toward your grief and heal. The capacity to love requires the necessity to grieve when someone you love dies. You can't heal unless you experience the pain of your grief. Denying your grief will only make it become more confusing and overwhelming. Embrace your grief and heal. Reconciling your grief will not happen quickly. Remember grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself. Never forget that the death of someone loved changes your life forever. It's not that you won't be happy again. It's simply that you will never be exactly the same as you were before the death. Acknowledge and embrace that change. Be gentle with yourself.

Knowing When to Get Help

Get help from a professional if:

- you want to make sure your grief responses are “normal”
- your grief feels like it is too much to bear, you feel overwhelmed and stuck with no movement forward
- your grief is causing problems at work, in a relationship, at home, with sleeping, with eating and other areas of your life
- there is a question, idea or feeling you can't work through
- you use or feel the urge to use alcohol or drugs to cope
- you work too much or jump into unhealthy relationships to avoid your grief and cope
- you engage in other risky behavior to cope with your pain
- you have any thoughts of suicide or homicide (tell someone, call 911 or a crisis hotline immediately)
- you are consistently depressed for 2 months or longer and it is interfering with your daily functioning

It is not a sign of weakness to get professional help when needed. It is a smart and courageous act when it is needed. It is a sign that you are taking responsibility for your healing.

Many sources of help are available. You can contact:

- grief support resources (contact Stein Hospice Bereavement Department 419-625-5269)
- a mental health provider
- your health care provider
- your employee assistance program (EAP)
- a religious leader