

## **IN RE: COPING WITH LOSS**

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What is grief?

Grief is the way we feel when we lose a person, pet, place or thing. It involves mixed emotions: sorrow, anger, shock, fear, distress, etc. Grief is not a disease. Rather, grief is a process – the process of dealing with the emotions that are a direct result of experiencing a loss.

Unfortunately, we cannot know how a particular loss is going to affect us emotionally, or how we are going to feel, until the threat of loss or loss actually occurs. One of our first reactions is to shut down. In other words, we react to our loss with shock, numbness and disbelief. This reaction cushions us from overwhelming feelings during the first hours or even weeks leading up to and immediately after experiencing the loss. How long does it take an individual to come out of his/her numbness to the loss depends on the individual circumstances surrounding each loss.

At some point, however, the individual realizes that the loss is real. As the numbness wears off, he/she begins to realize what the loss is going to mean. This explains why many individuals feel worse after a few months have gone by. The reality of this loss starts to sink in. Generally speaking, however, the most difficult grieving starts here because the support we received immediately after the loss has tapered off.

Still, we must allow ourselves to experience the pain of our loss in all of its forms. There are no shortcuts through the pain. We can “stuff down” feelings and delay grieving, but the grief will not diminish until we travel through it by experiencing it fully.

What are some common emotions and behaviors that make up the pain of grief?

Anger

Cannot eat/over-eat

Cannot sleep/over sleep

Crying

Denial

Disbelief

Guilt

Unfocused

Mood swings

Numbness

Resentment

Sadness

Shock

Tired

Dealing with these emotions, whether your loss is that of a loved one, a beloved pet, a marriage, a job or even a license to practice law is intense and complex. Furthermore, this journey cannot be traveled overnight. To travel successfully through our emotions

(grief), we need to take an active role in our own healing processes. Accordingly, it helps to understand how human beings respond to loss and whether our feelings and reactions are normal.

What are the stages of grief?

Stage 1 is shock. In other words, the individual normally cannot believe that he/she has incurred the loss, or will incur the loss. During this stage the individual usually shows the following signs: numbness, disbelief, emptiness, disconnect, lack of stamina and isolation.

Stage 2 is hurt. Generally, during this stage the individual actually feels the hurt. Subsequently, the hurt often develops into pain and emotional turmoil. More specifically, the individual experiences one or more of the following emotions: anger, bitterness, guilt, sadness, depression, loneliness, panic, and/or hopelessness.

Stage 3 is often referred to as the "stuck" stage. In other words, an individual may believe that nothing is worthwhile. Usually during this stage, the following behavior, both emotional and physical, is observed. The individual may become further isolated, fearful, insecure, disorganized, lethargic, blue, exhausted and dispirited.

Stage 4 is acceptance and affirmation. Very slowly change has taken place and a new life is not only accepted; but also affirmed. In other words, the individual is ready to go on with life.

What is the correct way to cope with the emotions of loss (grief)?

There is no right nor wrong way – only your unique way. Men and women may grieve differently. Men tend to hold feelings inside, feel responsible and keep busy. While on the other hand, women tend to show their emotions, may have flashbacks of other losses or of this loss, and usually seek support from others. Whatever gender or difference, including cultural, your way of coping with the emotions resulting from the loss may be positive or negative.

Because grieving is like a roller coaster – one day you may feel up, the next down. Therefore it is important to remember these positive tools for coping with a loss:

Allow yourself time to grieve

Accept that you will have bad days and good days

Don't let others tell you how you should feel or to just get over it. Grief is different for everyone.

Use a support system. Let family, friends, co-workers, etc. help you. Tell them what you need – it is ok

Do positive things that bring you comfort

Move a muscle - change a mood – walk. (Get up from your desk, leave the office, walk around the block)

Let your feelings out: talk, cry, pray, write

Try not to get caught up in your thinking. (If you have a long commute, alone in the car, but a couple of audio books – no sad music!)

Don't play the "if only" or "I wish I had" game  
Grow in a positive direction and volunteer  
Seek professional grief counseling  
Eat healthy  
Limit use of alcohol, caffeine, sugar and tobacco.  
Get rest

Some other helpful tips on coping with loss:

Give yourself time before making important decisions  
You may want to wait before moving or selling a house until you are sure what is best for you  
Get involved with a charity or organization  
Try a new hobby or take a class  
Join a support group or locate a chat group on the internet  
Read books on loss and coping – it helps to know that you are not alone.

Remember, in life – loss is inevitable. It is up to us to use positive coping skills to deal with the change that arises from a loss. Going through the above stages and using most of the above tools allow hope to break through the dark waves in the normally calm seas. Slowly new life incorporates both the loss, as well as the change, and has the strength to go on.

*During the week I have had to implement all of the above for I too am experiencing a loss – the loss of my best buddy of eleven years – an Austrian Cattle-dog named Squiggy.*