

Dealing with Loss and Grief

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There are many types of losses we have to deal over the course of our lives. Some examples of the most significant of these losses include: (1) loss of a loved one, (2) loss of a spouse through divorce, (3) loss of health, (4) loss of a pet, (5) loss of employment, (6) loss of a friend who has moved, and (7) loss of the familiar after moving.

Phases of Recovery

One important factor in being able to deal with grief is understanding that there are a number of predictable phases that people typically pass through after losing something or someone important. These phases include:

- **Shock and Denial:** The first reaction to a significant loss is often feeling overwhelmed and numb. This may include feeling weak, dumbfounded, anxious, or withdrawn.
- **Anger:** Blaming yourself or others for the loss.
- **Bargaining:** "If you'll just let my loved one live, I'll promise to go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life."
- **Depression:** Feeling deep sadness, disturbed sleep and eating patterns, dire thoughts, excessive emotionality.
- **Acceptance:** Being able to develop a new understanding of the loss and being able to discover lessons and the meaning of the loss.

The grieving process often involves experiencing all these phases, although not always in any particular order. People often cycle back and forth through a number of these phases before arriving at some degree of acceptance.

Admonitions for Recovery

While there are no hard and fast rules for the resolution of a loss, there are nevertheless some basic do's and don'ts that will facilitate recovery. Some of the most basic of these admonitions are as follows:

1. You are responsible for your own grief process. No one can tell you how to grieve, and no one will do your grieving for you. It is hard work and you must manage the process by yourself.
2. The grief process has a purpose; namely, to help you learn to accept the reality of the loss and to learn from the experience.
3. Remind yourself that your grief will end; that you will not feel like this forever; and that you will eventually adjust to the loss.
4. Take care of your health. Grief is extremely stressful, and it requires energy to manage the stress.
5. Be careful with food and drink. While it may be tempting to numb the pain with food and drink, this can lead to the additional problems of alcohol dependence and weight problems. Also, remember that numbing the pain means you are engaging in denial

- and this will have the effect of prolonging your grieving process.
6. If you have lost a loved one, talk about this person. People sometimes avoid talking about the loss as a denial mechanism. However, this only extends the grieving process.
 7. Take time to be alone. In the days and weeks following the loss of a loved one, there is often a flurry of activity with many visitors and phone calls. Added to the stress of your loss, all of this activity can be irksome and depleting. People will understand if you don't answer the phone for an afternoon or go to your room and close the door for a while.
 8. Don't make any important decisions until your life feels more balanced. It can be tempting to make some important changes right after a major loss as an effort to feel more in control. If you can, put off any major decisions until later.
 9. Maintain a normal routine if you can. You have enough changes in your life right now. Try to get up in the morning, go to bed at night, and take your meals at the same times you usually do.
 10. Ask for help because you will need it. If you don't want to be alone, or if you want someone to take you somewhere, it is okay to ask. People don't expect you to be self-sufficient right now.
 11. Let people help you. People want to help because it gives them a way to express their feelings. Staying connected with people is especially important now, and accepting help is a way of staying connected.
 12. When strong feelings come up, take note of them. Reflecting about your feelings helps you express them, rather than keeping them inside.
 13. Don't hurry your grief process. People sometimes want to put their feelings and memories behind them because they are painful. But grieving takes time, and there are no shortcuts.
 14. Remind yourself that although grief hurts, it will not harm you. Grief is painful, but you will survive and can even grow from the experience.
 15. Expect to regress in your recovery process from time to time. This is normal; it may happen unexpectedly, but it probably won't last long.
 16. Acknowledge the anniversary of your loss by taking the day off or doing something special. Have supportive people ready to be with you; it could be a difficult day and it's better not to be alone.

Suggested Reading

- Bozorth-Campbell, A. (1982). *Life is goodbye, life is hello: Grieving well through all kinds of loss*. Minneapolis, MN: CampCare.
- Bridges, W. (2004). *Transitions: Making sense of life's changes* (2nd ed.) NY: Da Capo Press.
- Knapp, D. (1986). *Beyond endurance: When a child dies*. NY: Schocken Books..
- Kubler-Ross, E. (1970). *On death and dying*. NY: Macmillan.
- Wallerstein, J., Lewis, J., & Blakeslee, S. (2000). *The unexpected legacy of divorce*. NY: Hyperion Press.
- Walsh, F., & McGolderick, M. (Eds.) (1991). *Living beyond loss: Death in the family*. NY: W. W. Norton & Co.