



Mary Potter
Hospice
With You



About grief



Grief is a normal process

Somebody close to you has died, perhaps after being unwell for sometime, or perhaps unexpectedly. However it has happened, life has changed for you.

Grieving is the process of adjusting to your loss and learning to live without that person in your life. The grief of bereavement is often accompanied by very strong and sometimes painful feelings.

This booklet aims to help you understand some of these. Not all of it will apply to you.

Everyone responds differently and it is important to remember that there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to grieve.

Grief is a normal, natural process of healing. Keep this booklet and re-read it in a month or so when some more time has passed.

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Grieving is up and down

Grieving is not something you begin one day, move through step-by-step and emerge from unchanged at the other end.

People sometimes speak of 'stages' of grief but in reality it is an up and down business and everyone experiences it differently.

Most people find that they move through a process of grieving gradually. Don't despair if you find yourself back at the beginning again and again – that's normal.

The healing process of grief

Sometimes it is helpful to compare the healing process of grieving with the physical process of healing after a physical injury. Just as with a physical wound, at first most people feel shock and numbness. It all seems impossible and unreal.

Even if you have been expecting the death for sometime, somehow it is still a shock when it happens.

Shock and numbness

Shock helps us through the first days and weeks after a death. Don't feel you have to push yourself past this. The sense of numbness will start to fade in a few days or weeks although it may return from time to time.

As time passes the reality of your loss will become clearer. You might feel that you can hear or see the person who has died again and there is fresh shock and disbelief again when you realise the truth of the loss.

Or you may find yourself completely unable to see their face and feel you have lost even your memory of them forever.

Taking care of ourselves

With a physical wound, pain has a purpose. It stops us from doing more damage – we find there are things we can't do, so we take care of ourselves and ask others to help us.

So too with grief. This is the time to be gentle on yourself. If it helps, let your emotional wound be cleansed by crying and talking out the feelings, and let others help and comfort you. Give yourself time to heal – don't expect too much of yourself.

Too many people make things harder by telling themselves 'I should be able to cope better than this'. If you resist mourning you may just take longer to feel better.

Waiting for healing.

When we injure ourselves, even after actual pain has passed, it is a long time before the tissue is strong and well again. Sometimes the waiting can seem very long and tedious and it is often the same when someone dies. Bereaved people long for a return to 'normality'.

Healing with Time

Eventually though, an injury, physical or emotional, heals itself and you are able to function again. In a time of grief this is a period of feeling more comfortable with your loss, of taking up the threads of life and living again.

Things will never be the same, but many people eventually become aware of the continued presence in their lives of the person who has died.

Through this experience of grief they feel they have become stronger, more caring and mature people.

However, it is hard to imagine this when you are deep in grief.

How does grief feel?

Many factors affect the way we experience grief: the amount of support we have, our personality, the kind of relationship we had with the person who has died, our experience of loss in the past and the degree to which our life has changed as a result of their death.

Sadness and anger

And people grieve differently. Some people are overwhelmed by the intensity of their feelings and wonder if they are going crazy.

If this has happened to you, be reassured that you are not going mad. You may feel very sad, despairing or empty one moment and angry and tense the next.

It is common to feel angry with God, with the person who has died, with the fact of death, with yourself or with those who were involved with caring at the time of illness or death.

Sometimes there is a reasonable cause for this anger, but even if there is not the feeling will still be there and it is real and normal.

Guilt and regret

You may feel guilty about the things you did or wish you had done differently. There may be regrets for the way things happened in the past.

When someone dies we lose the opportunity to change things and living with guilty feelings is hard. Often talking it over with someone helps.

Confusion and forgetfulness

Frequently people find they are confused and forgetful and getting even simple tasks done can seem like a big hurdle.

It's as if your mind is filled with thoughts of the person who has died and the circumstances of their illness and death, and you want to talk about them constantly.

Sometimes other members of your family may grieve differently and it will be hard to be understanding of each other.

Physical reactions

It is common to have physical reactions too: difficulty concentrating, tiredness, trouble sleeping, no appetite, unexplained aches and pains and a tight feeling in the chest.

It is not uncommon for people to have symptoms that mirror those of the person who has died. Again this is normal but talk over anything that is worrying you with your doctor. If lack of sleep becomes a real problem tell your doctor about it too – it may be that a short course of something to help

you get to sleep will offer a solution. Lack of sleep can make anybody's day feel awfully grim.

Coping at work

Concentrating and meeting deadlines can be especially hard for those who are working. If possible, talk it over with people who seem understanding at work.

Grieving people are often surprised by which people are able to offer support – usually it is someone who has experienced major loss themselves in the past.

Relief

It is also normal to feel happy that the person's suffering is over or relief that a person you had a difficult relationship with is no longer around. Most people find that there are aspects of the person who has died that they found difficult to get on with.

It is hard not to feel guilty about this sense of relief – we often seem to be expected to 'put someone up on a pedestal' when they have died – but remember they were human, with good points and bad ones, and you are too!

Although you may be surprised by your feelings, they are a normal, healthy response to your situation.

The death

The quality of the time immediately before and at the time of death can make a big difference to how we grieve too.



If the death was peaceful people often draw comfort from that peace and have a sense of acceptance about the loss even if they are sad.

If it was sudden or unexpected, it can take a long time to get over the shock of the death and the sense of things being left unfinished or unsaid.

Sometimes people have problems with what other people expect of them – one person will tell you to 'pull yourself together' and another will say you should 'have a good cry' and seem disapproving if you smile.

It is important to remember that everyone has their own way of handling difficulties, so do whatever is best for you. Once again, remember there is no right or wrong way to grieve.

How long does it take?

People often expect to be back to normal after just a few weeks or months. Friends and family can add to this feeling with comments such as 'Well life has to go on you know. It's time to pick yourself up and get on with living'. Often these messages feel like a criticism and you may feel you are being told not to grieve anymore.

For many people it is at least a year before the loss is no longer the big issue in their lives and several years before they feel healed, especially if the relationship was an important or long-standing one.

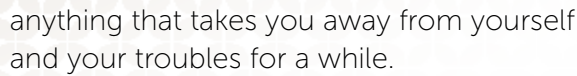
Try to be patient with yourself. Giving yourself time to mourn is the best way to heal.

How you can help yourself

Please do not feel, however, that the year or so ahead has to be a time of constant sadness. There is always something you can do to help yourself through the dark patches. Here are some suggestions:

- Remember that you are not alone: loss is part of life, part of being human. Find someone you can talk to and who will really listen. Seek out a counsellor if you feel you are burdening your friends.
- Get plenty of rest. Grieving uses a lot of emotional energy and you will probably feel very drained. The important thing is to try and balance rest with some productive activity.

- Being busy helps rest your emotions and getting something done in your day can help you feel better. Set yourself small, achievable goals and give yourself a pat on the back when you reach them.
- Keep decision making to a minimum. Try not to make any major changes for a while. Sometimes people will hurry you to get the deceased's clothes and effects sorted out, or to make a decision about where you will live in the long term. Do not rush these things – you are already making a huge adjustment to life without the person there, and there is no need to add to this if you can avoid it.
- Ask others to help. Sometimes it is best if you are specific about ways others can most help you. Do you need someone to do your lawns, or do you just need a shoulder to cry on?
- It is normal to feel angry. Find ways to be angry safely – play vigorous sport, scream in your car with the windows up, hit a pillow. You may feel silly but it often helps.
- Try to eat well. Eat small, nourishing, easily digested snacks if you have lost your appetite.
- Pamper yourself – hot baths, massages, comforting food, a favourite drink, a special magazine, listening to music, whatever helps.
- Learn how to distract yourself on the days you feel like you can't face life. Reading a gripping book, playing a hand of cards with a friend, watching a film or video –



anything that takes you away from yourself and your troubles for a while.


- Try keeping a journal. Write whenever you feel like it. Looking back over past entries helps to remind you that you are getting somewhere. And putting your thoughts on paper is a good way of getting them straight.
- Get some exercise – a good walk can turn your mood around. Try swimming, vigorous digging in the garden or playing sport. Even giving your home a good vacuum or mowing the lawn can help if you are feeling tense.
- Draw on your spiritual resources in whatever way is best for you. For some people this will mean going to church or talking to a priest or minister. For others it will be a walk on a beach or in the bush, or listening to inspirational music – whatever gives you a different perspective on life or a larger way of seeing your situation.
- Remember other difficult times you have had and how you managed them. Try to develop a sense of your personal coping style, what helps you best. This may help you to feel that while you do not have any control over the fact of your bereavement, you can take control of how you deal with it.

What the professionals can offer

If you are finding your grief burdensome it can help to talk to a professional counsellor, particularly one who is experienced in dealing with grief. They can't do your grieving for you, but they can 'walk with you' for a while.

Hopefully, you will have family or friends to support you through the next months, but sometimes it helps to talk to someone independent. Perhaps at the moment you are not feeling too upset by what happened, but bear it in mind if you do find things difficult later.

Many hospices offer bereavement services or you could ask your doctor or funeral director if they know of someone who could help you. Hospice bereavement counsellors usually offer a free service, and most others operate on a sliding scale fee basis.





Notes:





*Our namesake
The Venerable Mary Potter*

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