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Grief: Experiencing and Coping with Loss

At some point in our lives, we all most likely will face the loss of a family member, friend, or colleague. Each person manages the bereavement process and related emotions in unique and individual ways. For instance, some people outwardly express their grief, while others may respond with a more stoic approach. There’s no prescribed “right way” to grieve.

In addition to the loss of a loved one, other life changes can create a sense of grief. Such experiences might include moving to a new town, changing jobs, or receiving a concerning medical diagnosis. Similar to loss associated with a death, the grieving process will be unique to the individual, and there is no set timeline.

Being familiar with the different stages of grief and understanding that you can experience any or all of them in any order can help normalize your feelings. The following describes these stages and offers some tips for managing them:

- **Denial** allows us to not focus on the loss at times and can act as a buffer so that a person can function and prepare for strong emotions.

- **Anger** often accompanies loss. It is important to minimize stress and seek support from others.

- **Bargaining** can happen when we feel unprepared for the life challenge we now face. It is helpful to focus on the positives as this stage can be damaging to your self-esteem.

- **Depression** can occur. Focusing on self-care and following a daily routine can help; however, it is important also to seek professional support if depression associated with grieving hinders your ability to function and live life fully. Professional counseling services are available in most communities, and some employers offer the benefit of counseling through an employee assistance program such as TriHealth EAP.

- **Acceptance** happens when you begin to understand the loss that has occurred and are able to move forward with your life.

It’s important to realize that grief is a normal and unavoidable passage we experience after something we appreciate ceases to exist. The bereavement process allows us to cope and to heal from our loss.
Responding to Loss:  
The Physiological Impact of Grief

Losing someone close to you not only affects you emotionally but also affects you physically. While understanding the full impact of grief does not make it any easier, it can assist in managing the grieving process for yourself or someone close to you.

Grief affects each person differently; however, one of the most common physical responses to the grieving process is exhaustion. Little things that used to be accomplished without a tremendous amount of effort – such as grocery shopping – can become all-day tasks. The idea of getting dressed, driving to the store, carrying the grocery bags, and returning home can leave someone who is grieving completely drained and fatigued.

In addition to exhaustion, being emotionally and physically depleted can bring other physiological symptoms.

- Pain
- Sleeping difficulties
- Poor appetite or overeating
- Listlessness
- Disorientation
- Shakiness or trembling
- Migraines or headaches
- Dizziness
- Dry mouth
- Crying
- Numbness

It is important to work through grief and take the time that is needed to do so. Knowing that these symptoms may occur can make them more manageable, but it’s also important to contact your physician if any of these symptoms become overwhelming.

Is there anything I can do?  
How to Help Someone Who is Grieving

Often, people shy away from grieving people, not knowing how to help or what to say. They are so afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing that they end up avoiding the very person who needs attention, care, and the presence of others. So what can you do to help someone through the grieving process? Here are some simple suggestions:

- **Be present.** One of the best things a friend can do for a griever is just to be there.
- **Listen.** When a griever wishes to talk, you can provide a tremendous service by actively listening. Listen with patience and without judgment.
- **Accept the griever’s feelings.** You can help by accepting whatever feelings – anger, guilt, sadness, fear – the griever is experiencing at the moment. Affirm those feelings by saying something like, “It’s OK to feel that way,” or “It must be a difficult time for you.”
- **Talk about the person who died.** Friends sometimes think that “bringing it up” will remind the griever of the loss and cause more pain. Most grievers say their loss is always top-of-mind. They will be grateful you cared enough to ask.
- **Offer to help in a specific way.** Instead of saying, “If there’s anything I can do to help, let me know,” offer to bring dinner over on a specific evening.
- **Be patient.** Grieving the death of a loved one may take a long time.