Grief and loss

Loss is a natural part of human experience, but when it comes to the death of a loved one, loss can be overwhelming. Most of us know the old saying about the inevitability of death and taxes, and yet we are rarely prepared for the powerful feelings that can overcome us when a loved one passes away.

Bereavement refers to both the time period following a death and the range of feelings experienced during mourning. Some of the feelings and experiences reported by grieving people include the following:

- Sadness
- Shock ("This can't be happening to me!")
- Denial ("It's not true!" "I don't believe it's real!")
- Anger and rage ("How dare she leave me?" "God doesn't care!")
- Guilt ("It's all my fault.")
- Relief ("He doesn't have to suffer any more.")
- Fear, anxiety and panic ("How will I live without...")
- Hopelessness ("This pain will never get any better.")
- Fatigue
- Sleep problems (too much, too little, or early-morning waking)
- Increase in alcohol and prescription drug use (often in an attempt to sleep)
- Inability to concentrate
- Withdrawal from social activities
- Weight loss or weight gain

Some people grieve intensely while others may not feel their lives have changed much at all. As many different people as there are in the world, there are as many different ways to grieve! There is no right way to mourn. Bereavement is a highly individual experience and is affected by factors such as:

- Culture and gender
- Temperament
- The nature of the relationship to the deceased
- The experience of previous losses, which may be "retriggered" by the current situation
- The nature of the death itself (e.g., survivors of someone who commits suicide may experience longer and more intense bereavement)
- The survivor's level of outside support

There are no hard and fast rules for the cycle of bereavement. However, for many people, grief follows certain stages. In Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy, William Worden describes the stages of grief as consisting of four circles which overlap to some extent. Each of these four circles, or stages, involves a task:

**Task one:** To accept the reality of the loss.

**Task two:** To experience the pain of grief.

**Task three:** To adjust to the environment in which the deceased is now missing.

**Task four:** To withdraw emotional energy from the deceased person and reinvest it in other relationships.
It's important to remember that these tasks, or stages, are not distinct. In other words, an individual might struggle with task two for a year, and then move through the next two tasks together in a month.

Grief and older people

Although there are few rules for the way people grieve, older people often face special challenges. First, the older the individual, the more likely that he or she has already experienced significant losses. For instance, a 75-year-old woman has likely lost her parents and may have lost a lifelong friend or two, as well as one or more siblings. If this same woman is now grieving the loss of her husband of 50 years, she may feel that she is mourning the death of not just one beloved person, but many. This is because major losses often bring sad feelings from the past back to the surface, making our present feelings stronger.

If we look at this same 75-year-old woman, we might note that with each of her losses, she has fewer important people left in her life. She has now experienced the loss of many of the people who have known her the longest. She may feel that with each loss of a longtime loved one, a piece of her own history is lost too. People in their eighties and nineties often say they feel as if all their friends are gone and that it gets harder to make new ones. If a person has only a few friends and family left, this can affect the bereavement process. This experience of many losses over time is a major factor not only in the way older people grieve, but also in the high rate of depression for this age group.

Many of us simply cannot imagine what it feels like to lose a spouse of 50 years or even more. Apart from the loss of a child, the death of a longtime spouse is thought to be the most difficult grief to endure. Yet this is a very common experience for older adults.

On the positive side, experience in dealing with loss often leads to more effective ways of coping. In that sense, many older people deal with loss better than younger people do. They may experience less shock and know how to take care of themselves. As in so many areas, the rich life experience that older people bring to this process can be a tremendous strength. Still, it is never easy.

Self-care is an important part of "grief relief"

Some of the ways bereaved people can take care of themselves include the following:

Get support. There are all kinds of support. For one person, the best thing you could give him is a backrub along with an afternoon spent talking about his absent loved one. This may include reminiscence, looking at photos, or even helping to create a small memorial of some kind. For someone else, support may involve cooking a good meal, cleaning her house and avoiding all talk of the deceased! By all means, ask the bereaved person what he or she needs, if you don't know. If you're the bereaved person, try to figure out what you need and ask for it. Your family and friends may know you very well but they are not mind readers. If the support of family and friends is not readily available, a bereavement support group or one-to-one grief counseling should be considered.

Maintain good nutrition. When we're feeling down, it's easy to eat poorly or skip meals altogether. This worsens the fatigue that many bereaved persons feel. Proper nutrition contributes to an overall sense of well-being.

Exercise, exercise, exercise. While it may be true that there is no quick cure for grief, exercise is a way for bereaved people to regain a sense of strength and control during an experience that feels out of their control. In addition, exercise is known to ease feelings of depression. (Be sure not to overdo it, and talk with your doctor before starting an exercise routine.)

Avoid the use of alcohol and drugs. The numbing of feelings through the use of alcohol and drugs only prolongs the resolution of grief. Many drugs have depressive effects which make bereavement worse, not better. If the grieving person is not sleeping, he or she should consult a doctor.

Take it easy. Losing a loved one can be one of life's most painful experiences. Do not expect too much of yourself or your older relative during this difficult time. People who are mourning need time alone as well as time with others. Above all, they need patience and understanding.

Maintain rituals (or make new ones). Bring flowers to the grave site. Create a memory box devoted to the person that you can take out and put away as you wish. If it's not uncomfortable, continue to celebrate holidays or take a Sunday drive just as you always did when the person was alive. Find new ways to increase your well-being, whether that means writing a daily journal or signing up for a class.

Now that we've considered what is helpful to the bereaved person, let's take a look at what is not helpful:

- Telling someone to "just get over it," to "move on," or that he or she "will find someone new."
- Expressing discomfort when the bereaved person shares or even just shows his or her feelings.
- Avoiding discussion of the deceased person due to a fear of upsetting the bereaved. It's often more upsetting to pretend that the deceased
person never existed!

- Trying to force the bereaved person to express his or her feelings because she's in denial or he's not dealing with it.
- Pushing the bereaved person to move within the first year (when not necessary) or pushing him or her to get rid of all of the clothes and belongings of the deceased before he or she is ready.

It's important to remember that grief is a part of life. If we can face this truth, death and grief become less frightening, or at least less mysterious. There are no easy answers or quick fixes for emotional suffering, but our willingness to address the reality of loss can be the first step in supporting one another.

Sources

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Reviewed 12/13