

SURVIVING THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE

Often people who have very recently experienced the loss of a loved one feel overwhelmed, confused, and frightened by their feelings. They wonder if they are grieving in “the right way” and may worry that they are going crazy.

Most people who suffer a loss experience one or more of the following:

- ❖ **Feel heaviness in the chest and tightness in the throat.**
- ❖ **Have an empty feeling in the stomach and loss of appetite.**
- ❖ **Feel guilty at times, angry at other times.**
- ❖ **Feel restless and look for activity, but find it difficult to concentrate.**
- ❖ **Feel as though the loss isn't real, and that the loved one will return.**

Generally people:

- ❖ **Sense the loved one's presence and expect the person to walk through the door, may hear his voice, or see his face.**
- ❖ **Wander aimlessly, forget things, and don't finish projects.**
- ❖ **Have difficulty sleeping, and frequently dream of the loved one.**
- ❖ **Assume mannerisms and traits of the loved one.**
- ❖ **Feel their mood change over the slightest things.**

Many people will:

- ❖ **Experience intense preoccupation with the life of the deceased.**
- ❖ **Feel guilty or angry at things that did/did not happen in the relationship.**
- ❖ **Feel intense anger at the loved one for leaving.**
- ❖ **Feel that they need to take care of others who seem uncomfortable around them, by politely not talking about the feelings of loss.**
- ❖ **Cry at unexpected times.**

All of these are normal and natural responses to the loss of a loved one. It is important to talk, cry, etc, and let these feelings out, as this is a necessary part of the grieving process.

THE FOUR TASKS OF GRIEVING

Grief is a process, and is hard work. It takes energy and patience. There are four tasks that a person needs to work through in order to cope effectively with the loss and regain a sense of mastery and control.

TASK 1: ACCEPT THE REALITY OF THE LOSS.

Denial and disbelief are very often the first feelings that a person experiences when a death occurs. The person needs to work through this denial in order to understand that the loved one has died and will not return.

A person may refuse to accept the facts of the loss (i.e.; ‘he is not really gone), or he/she may deny the meaning of the loss. This would occur if the person minimized the loss – i.e.; “he wasn’t a good parent anyway – I’m better off without him”.

Time is needed to achieve this task of acceptance – both on an intellectual and an emotional level.

TASK 2: WORK THROUGH THE PAIN OF GRIEF.

The grieving person needs to FEEL THE FEELINGS or else the grieving process will be delayed or become stuck.

The pain is often felt on an emotional, physical, and spiritual level. This task is often the most difficult for people, as the feelings can be intense.

Certain messages and behaviors can block the feelings of pain, and get in the way of successful grieving. Messages from well meaning friends who say, “It is time to move on,” suggests that the person should not be feeling the way they are feeling. People in grief may attempt to avoid the pain by a geographic move. We are often told by messages in society that it is not “ok” to show feelings, and should “be tough”.

If the grieving person does not successfully complete this task, he/she is at risk for carrying the pain with them throughout life, which may result in depression or physical illness.

TASK 3: ADJUST TO AN ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH THE DECEASED IS MISSING.

This task requires the loved one to recognize:

- 1. The role the deceased had in his/her life, and what exactly is lost.**

For example, a woman who loses her husband recognizes over time the various roles he had in her life. He may have been the handyman, the companion, the financial planner, the sex partner, and the one who stays calm under pressure.

2. Ones' sense of self and how it is altered as a result of the loss.

Often, after a loss, one sense of self, or identity, is altered. The task is to redefine oneself – often through the development of new competencies and new experiences.

3. Sense of the world around him/her and how he/she now fits in.

This includes evaluating direction in life, values, beliefs, and life's new meaning and purpose without the deceased.

If this task is not completed adequately, the person will not gain the necessary skills to cope, and may remain helpless and dependent, and may begin to withdraw from active participation in the world around him.

TASK 4: TO EMOTIONALLY RELOCATE THE DECEASED AND MOVE ON WITH LIFE.

The goal of this task is not to forget or replace the loved one, but to find a “suitable place” in the psyche of the bereaved that honors the deceased but also allows for and leaves room for others.

This task involves reinvesting energy towards looking forward instead of investing all one's energy in the past.

This phase incorporates all the changes and adaptations into a renewed sense of hope, acceptance, and peace.

If this task is not completely successfully, the grieving person risks not being to love again. The person is holding on so tightly to the past that there is no opportunity to connect with the present and what it has to offer.

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

When faced with the loss of a loved one, it is important to remember certain activities will help with the healing process and others may impede the process.

- **Give yourself the permission, the time, and the space to grieve.**
- **Don't pretend that this experience doesn't hurt.**
- **Understand and accept your limitations and your feelings.**
- **Respect others' timetables and methods of grieving.**
- **Laughter is good – it doesn't mean you are being disrespectful to your loved one's memory.**
- **It's ok, sometimes even healthy, to cry.**
- **Tell friends and family what you need from them and what you don't.**
- **Recognize that seeking professional help is not a sign of weakness.**
- **Use those resources that have worked in the past to give comfort, relief, and understanding.**
- **Continue to participate in activities that are fun for you and spend time with people who are special to you.**