

Bereavement

What is it?

When someone you love dies, it is natural to go through a predictable process of grieving. Everybody's reaction and way of dealing with bereavement differs according to various circumstances and personal factors: Was the death unexpected or sudden? How old was the deceased? How old are you? All these factors, including your support system after the death, religious beliefs and so on, have a bearing on how you grieve. Normal grieving does however follow a general pattern that any bereaved person should recognize as normal. The following emotions are regarded as normal and actually emotions that a grieving person often needs to go through in order to overcome the initial trauma.

The first stage/Shock or disbelief

The immediate reaction is for you to simply feel numb and empty. For a short time you may feel and behave almost as though nothing has happened: everything is a blur. Eventually, extreme grief may take over. During this first stage delusions of seeing or speaking with the dead person may occur and although these experiences may disturb you this reaction is regarded as normal. There is also a tendency to forget that the person is dead and act as though he or she were alive. You will find it difficult to concentrate. You may have outbursts of spontaneous emotions such as crying, screaming or even laughing.

The second stage/Grief and despair

At this stage the loss of your loved one will really become real to you. This sense of loss is reinforced by constant reminders of lost habits and experiences and by having to deal with the reality of the situation: for example dealing with your loved one's clothes and other personal effects left behind. You will feel intensely sad and lonely. Friends and acquaintances will in all likelihood not visit you as much as they did in the early days after the death and. You need to expect that many people may feel uncomfortable and embarrassed about approaching you, not knowing how to deal with the situation themselves. You may actually feel like withdrawing from people. The sense of presence of the deceased will continue. You are also likely to experience feelings of anger or guilt.

Anger

This may include anger towards those considered responsible for the death and even at the deceased for dying. Your resentment may include self-recrimination or even blaming and accusing the medical attendants of neglect. You will feel like talking a lot about your loved one and you will probably recall vivid memories leading up to the death and constantly churn them over in your mind. Common recurring thoughts include: "Why did it happen to me?" "If only this or that had been done first then it would all be different now."

Guilt and self-blame

You may feel guilty because you did not do more for the person or take more notice of them. Such guilt feelings and intense grief are more common when the death is unexpected. It is common to think: "If only I had done this or that."

When will you recover?

The feeling of intense grief usually lasts about six weeks and the overall stage of grief for about six months, but it can resurface every now and then over the next few years. The way people grieve is unique to each individual, but a person can expect to feel a gamut of emotions during this period which range from sad and helpless at times, to apathetic and depressed to angry and anti-social and finally acceptance.

Acceptance/adaptation.

After about six months you will begin to accept your severe loss. You develop a change in living habits by taking up new roles and activities. You can face up better to disposing of personal effects, establishing new relationships and attending to financial arrangements. This transition phase often lasts a year or so. However, feelings of apathy and depression can still be a problem. Feelings of physical illness are also common, including problems such as insomnia, breathing difficulties, diarrhoea and stomach pains. You may wish to consult your doctor about any worrying physical or mental problems.

What can you do?

Despite a host of unpleasant emotions, it is comforting to know that eventually "time does heal" and you will adapt and learn to cope - even if you go through stages of not wanting to cope or "get over it." First, you must realise that it is normal to pass through these stages of grieving and it is pointless fighting this healing process. It is best to acknowledge your loss and try not to "shut it out" or deny it. Talking about the deceased to relatives and friends and sorting out the person's possessions will help enormously in coming to terms with your loss, even though it may be painful at first.

At the beginning it is good, if possible, to see the dead person, touch them if you want to, attend the funeral and give expression to your emotions. If you have doubts about the exact cause of the death you may wish to discuss it with your doctor. If you have prolonged intense feelings of grief or severe depression then seek help from your doctor. You may find considerable support from others who have suffered a similar loss and from various self-help organisations.

Most people find that it is helpful to have a break away from the home while others find that staying with sympathetic friends or relatives helps during the initial process of grieving - or at whatever time you feel you need this. Obviously the first anniversary or the first Christmas or Chinese New Year spent alone can be a very difficult time. Many people find it helpful to make arrangements to have company at such times.