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How to cope with loss and grief

Grief is a natural response when you lose someone or something that is important to you. That loss can be the death of a loved one or the end of a relationship and it can also be the loss of a way of life, a hope or dream that is changed by circumstances which are sometimes beyond our control.

Natural disasters are occurring at an increasing rate and as resources and support are being stretched in communities', people are needing to rely more on their own coping mechanisms to deal with and manage their losses and consequent emotional distress. When people experience several changes to the way that they live and the things around them, often in a traumatic way, grieving the loss of what has changed is commonplace and to be expected.

The more significant the loss is to you, the more intense the reaction you may have to that loss. Grief is an individual process and each of us respond in ways that are unique to us. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, so try not to compare yourself to others. People vary in how they respond and what affects them. Some people find they can manage the situation and find that there is little change in how they respond in their everyday life. Others may find it difficult to cope and are uncertain of how to act and what the future may bring.

When people are so busy dealing with day to day life, they sometimes do not notice the physical and emotional signs that indicate they are not coping. You can experience a range of emotions and physical symptoms after a significant loss. It can affect every part of your life; your emotions, the things you think about and do, beliefs, physical health, your sense of self and identity, and your relationships with others.

Grief can leave you feeling:

Sad – longing for what has gone or changed; crying and feeling tearful.

Angry – at why this has happening; at whoever or whatever caused it, at those who don't seem to be helping and even at those trying to help.

Anxious – about how you will cope; nervous about the potential outcome.

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Remorseful – about the things you might have done, or not done, before this happened.

Relieved – that things are over; that distressing emotions and physical pain and fear have ended.

Isolated – that you are alone and that no one else can understand how you are feeling.

Disappointed – blaming yourself that you couldn't control what happened; that life is turning out like this after so many years of hard work.

Guilty – for being better or worse off than others; that you can't fix things or make it better for others.

Shame – for being exposed as helpless, 'emotional' and needing others; for not reacting like you wished you had.

All these feelings are typical grief reactions. It is important to allow ourselves time to process what has happened to us after a traumatic event before we can get back to what is normal, or to create a new normal, in our everyday lives. Most people can recover from painful experiences as they rebuild their lives and develop new strengths but sometimes recovery takes time. There are things we can do for ourselves and others that helps the healing and to move into the future.

What can I do?

You may be wondering what you can do to help manage your own feelings of grief. Here are a few ideas that may be useful.

- **When you are ready and in your own time, talk with others who care for you.** Share your feelings with them and be clear about what you find helpful. People don't always know how to help, so tell them what you need. Be specific so that they can be honest about their capacity to do what you ask. Don't get discouraged if someone says they can't. Accept that they may not be able to meet your need right now and ask someone else.

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- **Try to keep your life as normal as possible during the period of stress; establish a daily routine with regular times for sleep, meals, work, being sociable and physical activity.** Try and create some balance in your everyday activities so that no one thing dominates. For instance, if you like to keep busy to forget things, balance your work with some physical activity. Keep your sleeping times and eating habits as close to what is usual for you. It can be just as easy to oversleep and overeat as it is to skip sleep and under eat. Make sure that you allow time in your schedule to grieve what is lost. This doesn't mean you can only grieve at the scheduled time, but it is an acknowledgement that grief takes time and effort to process and burying this under other activities may just prolong the process.
- **Be prepared for difficult events that trigger your memories and sadness.** This may happen on anniversaries, birthdays, reunions or perhaps when you see reminders of what you have lost. Events that have happened in the past continue to impact on our lives long after the event has passed. Do some planning in the lead up to significant occasions so that you have a pre-arranged idea of how you are going to manage. Planning can give you a greater sense of control.
- **Try not to suppress your emotions.** If you feel sad and want to cry, then do that. Likewise, don't feel like you can't enjoy yourself. It is possible to feel a range of emotions and they can co-exist at the same time. Being happy doesn't mean you have forgotten your sadness of the loss.
- **Encourage your children to talk to you and others about their emotions.** As a parent, you can't protect your child from the pain of loss, but you can help them to feel safe. By helping your child express their emotions you are building their skills for coping in their adult lives. Make sure you share your feelings with them as well so that they can see that it is okay to feel pain when you lose something or someone important to you.
- **If your family circumstances have changed financially then let others, including your children, know about the things you can afford to do and where you need to cut back on expenses.** Don't take any impulsive actions or feel pressured to do the things that you used to do.

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- **Consider any drug and alcohol use with care.** While substances can feel like an easy relief, they can perpetuate your grief as their impact on the brain and the central nervous system can make it harder to process emotions and can leave feelings unresolved. Using substances can easily become a habit and lead to addiction.
- **Spiritual and religious beliefs can help reconnect people by lending larger meaning to one's life and changed circumstances.** Some people do this through prayer or meditation or yoga, others by gardening or communing with nature. Think about what sustains your spirit and make time to find comfort in things that provide relief and uplift you.
- **Explore your options for professional help if your grief feels too much for you to bear.** An experienced health professional can help you work through intense emotions and overcome obstacles to your grieving. You can consider joining a support group as sharing your grief with others who have experienced similar losses may help.