

## The Stages of Grief

Grief is a completely normal and healthy response to losing a loved one. Divorce, miscarriage, loss of a pet, losing your joy and even moving house or other times of change and loss can also trigger the grief process. Whatever the circumstances are it is a natural process that takes its own course and time.

Grief is a deeply personal experience that affects us both emotionally and physically. There are no rules about grieving to which we have to conform to. Nevertheless there are certain responses and feelings that are commonly part of the grief process. They can come and go and there are times when we feel we will never be out of them and other times when life is ok again.

The text below is from 'The Complete Book of Funeral Planning Readings & Music' Rachel Johnstone-Burt, Alison Gibbs & Rev. John Wynburne:

### **Numbness & Shock**

*Our initial response may be one of shock. We find it hard to believe what has happened. We can be speechless, quite unable to take in what has happened. It does not seem real or possible but more like a bad dream from which we will awake. We may feel quite unable to cry or express any emotion. There maybe no feeling at all but just deadness and feeling of distance from the whole event. It may feel as though this not happening to us or as though the dead person has just gone away for a while and we expect them to return. Sometimes feelings of panic may invade our dream like state.*

### **Denial**

*With shock and disbelief will frequently go denial of the death. The finality of the loss and separation is too much to bear and we cannot accept it. We want to believe it is a mistake, that the loved one is not dead. As a result, we may find ourselves searching for the loved one, anticipating that they will appear again. It is often during this phase that we have an experience of seeing the dead person, sensing their presence, hearing their voice or even feeling their touch.*

### **Anger**

*As the shock wears off, the impact of our loss starts to sink in and we begin to feel the pain. This may initially be felt and expressed through powerful feelings of anger. Sometimes it can feel quite uncontrollable and overwhelming. We may find ourselves feeling angry towards doctors, nurses, God or others trying to help us. Our family, friends and relatives may be the recipients of our anger. We can feel full of guilt for reacting in the way we do towards them. We may also resent anybody who has not suffered a similar loss and experience. We may feel anger towards the person who has dies for leaving and abandoning us. We may question why this has happened and who is responsible. The anger may also be directed at ourselves and can result in negative, destructive feelings that are damaging to our health.*

### **Anguish**

*When the loss begins to hit us the pain can be immense. This is the time when we feel totally crushed by emotion, vulnerable and fragile. We may collapse in a heap of uncontrollable*

tears. Suddenly we feel very isolated and alone. We feel drained and bewildered. We feel as though our life has been broken in pieces. We feel a frightening gap that we assume nobody or nothing else can fill.

### **Depression and Withdrawal**

A great outpouring of emotion may be followed by a time of detachment and depression. Feeling very low, we wonder what the purpose is of carrying on. We feel drained of energy. Most activities seem meaningless. We may wish for company and closeness but we also want to be alone, to have space. We may even feel suicidal, thinking that such an act would unite us with the one we have lost. It is a distressing time as we sink into a deep hole and wonder whether we will ever get out or even want to do so.

### **Guilt**

Feelings of guilt often accompany the loss of a loved one. This is a normal part of the landscape on the journey through grief.

1. We may feel guilty for not feeling sad or responding in the way others expect. However, when the loved one has had a long and fulfilling life, a good death and we have had a chance to say goodbye, there may not be a strong sense of sadness and loss. We may feel pleased or relieved.
2. We may feel guilty about letting go of the loved one because, by doing so, we feel we are abandoning them.
3. We may feel guilty for not being present when the person died; that if we had been there we could have prevented it.
4. We may feel that we could and should have done more to keep them alive; that we have let them down; that we are responsible for their death. There is a host of 'if onlys' that go through our mind.
5. Perhaps the greatest cause of guilt is 'unfinished business' – the feeling that we wish we had said or done something or acted differently and that now it is too late. We wish we could turn back the clock. It is particularly hard when we regret quarrels or negative feelings that were unresolved.

To enable our recovery to take place and our journey through grief to continue, we have to come to terms with our guilt. This will mean getting our feelings out into the open, and forgiving ourselves and others. Guilt is often the place where we become stuck in the grieving process.

### **Physical Symptoms**

The emotional pain of grief can affect our physical and mental health, especially in the short term. Many who have lost a loved one will speak of being 'heartbroken'. Some of the effects of grief may include:

- A tightness in the throat or chest or shortness of breath
- An empty feeling in the stomach
- Muscle weakness
- Shivering, palpitations, diarrhoea, numbness
- Insomnia – staying awake at night thinking about the lost person: the inability to rest except for short periods

- *Loss of appetite & weight loss*
- *Headaches*
- *Heightened sensitivity to noise*

### **Psychological Symptoms**

*It is common to experience some of these intense feelings after suffering a bereavement:*

- *Feeling lost and bewildered*
- *Fear of not being able to cope*
- *Inability to concentrate*
- *Fear of going mad or becoming strange*
- *A sense that nothing is worth doing any more*
- *A sense of being disconnected from the world and others*
- *Feeling detached from one's own body*
- *Feeling like an automaton*
- *Emotional deadness*
- *Suicidal feelings*
- *Loss of self-esteem*

### **Recovery**

*When we are at the beginning of our journey through grief and overcome by our loss, we wonder we will ever recover and cope with life again. There is often real doubt that we shall ever get better. 'Who would have thought my shrivelled heart could ever recover greenness?' asked the poet George Herbert. Well, it is possible. The reality is that most people do recover from grief, reconnect with life and re-invest in the future. It is very important to remember that grief does not last for ever. Recovery, however, is a gradual process. It takes time and is helped by the encouragement of others and sometimes professional help.*

### **A Note from Ann-Marie**

In my experience grief is not generally talked about or encouraged to be felt and expressed in healthy ways. In our culture we still have the debris from the Victorian 'stiff upper lip' scenario and the blackness that surrounds that era. Expressing our feelings is vital and crucial to healing the heart and soul. For that to take place we need to feel safe, loved and trusting with whoever we feel we want to share our sorrow with.

When I lost my father and then my brother a few years later, I had no idea how to grieve and certainly would not share my feelings and emotions with others. I became numb and felt completely lost. I thought I should 'just get on with it'. Several years later it came to bite me on the back side (so to speak) I fell apart and then began the journey of healing.

When I first read the signs of grief several years ago – I cried for a long time. It was so reassuring to know that all I had felt and experienced was 'normal' and I felt such a sense of relief. Even when I went through my divorce - the grief that I felt was beyond anything I had experienced before. I not only felt the loss, I felt guilt and shame along with many other overwhelming feelings.

Just acknowledging your pain and grief, is such a powerful and cathartic experience that will inevitably lead you to come to a place of acceptance and inner peace.

I am so passionate about helping people through this journey because I know how it feels and how devastating it can be. You are never alone, even though it feels like it. There is always help and love available to you – all you have to do is ask.....

I am here for you if you wish to heal your broken heart and recover from grief.

More from 'The Complete Book of Funeral Planning Readings & Music':

### ***Children and Grief***

*Children and teenagers also experience grief. They too need to make the journey, go through the phases, be allowed to share in the sorrow, express their sadness and ask questions. The following are a few guidelines.*

- *Children of different ages will experience and understand death in different ways. However, they should not be protected or shut out from the feelings surrounding the death. Telling them to 'be brave' may inhibit their need to grieve.*
- *It is best to be open and honest with children, to be direct and simple when telling them about a death. They may need help to express their feelings and attempting to protect them from reality, even with the best possible intentions, will not be constructive. In any case, children are usually very aware that things are being kept from them.*
- *Children do not stay with sadness as long as adults and tend to go through the phases more quickly. But they still need time and permission to grieve, with a great deal of love and support.*
- *Children can get stuck on the journey of grief just like adults. If this happens they may need professional help to move on. Signs that not all is well may manifest themselves by withdrawal from social interaction, depression, persistent headaches or stomach aches, unhappiness at school, behavioural problems or behaviour that is out of character.*
- *Children can blame themselves for a death. They need reassurance that they are not responsible.*
- *Children like to feel they are being helpful, comforting and supportive to others. Giving them genuinely helpful jobs makes them feel included and wanted.*
- *Adults can help prepare their children for the experience of death and grief by not avoiding it as a subject in the home, as though it were a secret for grown-ups. Often the death of a pet is a way in which to expose children to the reality of death and the sadness that follows.*
- *Adults may be fearful that children will be harmed or frightened by attending a funeral. However, children are quite resilient and generally prefer to stay within the family circle. More harm can be done by excluding them than allowing them to participate. It is a good policy to ask them what they would like to do. Explaining to them beforehand what is going to happen can be an enormous help.*
- *The difficulty adults have with talking about death with their children can be a reflection of their own inability to face issues of death.*