

COPING WITH LOSS AND GRIEF

The shock and pain of loss bring a range of powerful and frightening emotions that few of us are prepared for.

The death of a parent, partner, child or other close person is the most desperate loss that we may have to cope with. But we all experience losses throughout the course of our lives. Some of these are illness; disability; ageing; being the victim of rape or other violence; separation from partner or divorce; stillbirth, abortion and miscarriage; children becoming young adults and leaving home; loss of belongings from theft, fire, war or other disasters; and several times in our lives we may change jobs and homes and move away from family, friends, colleagues and familiar surroundings.

The intensity of our feelings and our ability to cope with these losses will depend on various factors which include our degree of attachment to the person, the objects or the circumstances; whether the severance was expected and prepared for or sudden and shocking; whether we had some control and say in the matter or the loss was involuntary and against our will.

Numbness and disbelief are often the immediate reactions to a death.

A newly bereaved person may deny what has happened and continue to behave as if the dead person was still alive, for example, shopping and cooking and making arrangements as usual.

When the months of the strain of caring for a terminally person are over, a great sense of relief may be the initial reaction, but possibly accompanied by feelings of guilt, self-reproach and remorse - 'If only I'd taken better care of him/her; been a better spouse; been more sympathetic; spent more time with them'. Feelings of rage and anger can also take them by surprise - 'How could she/he leave me alone? How do they expect me to cope?'

The bereaved can be left with a great sense of insecurity and fear, sometimes expressed in panic attacks. The sense of being lost, alone and lonely is very frightening and a great yearning for the loved one can be almost overwhelming. Many people feel a powerful urge to return to some of the places they knew with their loved ones, almost as if they will find them there.

Feeling the presence of a lost person, dreaming of them, imagining they are still at work or in another room, hearing their voice or sensing their presence is not a sign of madness but a very common experience.

The need to talk over and over the events leading up to the death, as if somehow they could be altered, is also very common. Yet many people feel needlessly ashamed of their reactions and are discouraged from honestly expressing their painful thoughts and feelings. The fear of 'cracking up' or 'giving in' often forces people to deny their true feelings - even to themselves. Well-meaning friends and relatives, often supportive during the first few weeks or months, soon expect to see the bereaved person 'getting over it' and urge them to cheer up.

Fear of upsetting children and other family members can force people to put a brave face on it and submerge their grief. This is always damaging. Unresolved grief or inability to resolve emotional tension can result in stress-related illness. It is estimated that one-third of those who lose a spouse develop health or emotional problems. Unresolved grief is an illness with recognisable symptoms. Loss of sleep, loss of appetite, headaches and general lassitude and tiredness are just some.

A sort of plateau of hopelessness, bringing with it depression and apathy, complete exhaustion and even a wish to die, may come some time during the first year of bereavement, before even the first glimmer of hope and acceptance begin to dawn.

The four tasks of what Freud termed 'grief work' are

- 1) to truly recognise and accept the loss
- 2) to mourn the loss, giving expression to the grief
- 3) to perform the new tasks of life that the loss obliges us to take on
- 4) to look to a new kind of future.

Progress through grief is not orderly. You may feel stronger on some days and then suffer a return to periods of hopeless tears. There is no set time by which the bereaved person suddenly throws off the depression and feels better. The whole process of grief may take months, a year or several years.

The emotions of grief, painful though they are, lead to acceptance and healing. The purpose of grief is to allow the bereaved person to gradually come to an understanding of what the loved one meant to them and to an acceptance of a new and meaningful life.