

# *Grief Work: A Brief Overview*

## *1. The Tasks of Mourning*

### **In order to adapt and to heal:**

- ❖ We do the hard work of accepting the reality of death
- ❖ We allow ourselves to experience the pain of grief
- ❖ We strive to adjust to a life where the deceased is no longer present
- ❖ We learn to withdraw emotional energy and reinvest it in other relationships

## *2. How We Grieve*

- ❖ Some of us grieve with our minds, and our thinking overrides our feelings
- ❖ Some of us express our loss through anger or in silence
- ❖ Some of us focus on problem-solving and activity rather than on our emotions
- ❖ Some of us need to appear that we are in control and are strong
- ❖ Some of us only express our emotions privately
- ❖ Some of us grieve with our hearts and express our feelings with tears and emotions
- ❖ Some of us need to give and receive nurturing and empathy
- ❖ Some of us reach out to others and show our anguish openly

## *3. Myths about Grief*

- ❖ Death is the only loss that we grieve / **We grieve all losses**
- ❖ Only family members grieve / **If we are attached, we grieve**
- ❖ Grief is simply an emotion / **Grief is emotional, mental, physical & spiritual**
- ❖ We get over our losses / **We learn to adjust, but we remember**
- ❖ People don't want to talk about their losses / **We need someone to share in our memories and emotions**

## *4. Grief, Guilt, & Blame*

- ❖ **We may ask, "What if..."** We may second guess our decisions and the decisions of others, but we all strive to make the best choices we have with the tools we have available to us at the time.
- ❖ **We may say, "If only..."** We may have regrets about words that were left unsaid or about statements blurted out in confusion, anger, frustration, and exhaustion. However, this is part of our human experience and we all benefit from compassion for ourselves and for each other.
- ❖ **We may say, "I should have..." or "You should have..."** We may have a strong desire to change past events, although we know we are unable to do so. One definition of forgiveness is abandoning all hope of a better past. Forgiving ourselves and others allows us to heal our hearts and our hurts.

## *5. Good Grief: Helping Ourselves Grieve*

- ❖ **Take care of ourselves physically.** Grief disrupts eating and sleeping patterns. It helps to do our best to maintain healthy schedules. We may benefit from eating small portions of high nutrition foods frequently. Taking long walks or engaging in other enjoyable exercise, working toward 30-40 minutes of aerobic exercise 4 to 7 times a week is beneficial. Our bodies do better when we drink plenty of water and maintain regular sleep habits. It helps if we go to bed at a regular time, avoid reading or watching TV in bed, and keep the room where we are sleeping darkened. Sometimes deep breathing, guided meditation tapes, and playing soft music helps bring on restful sleep.

Shannon Stevens-Commers  
Horizon Home Health & Hospice  
900 N Linder Meridian, ID 83642  
(208) 884-5051

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- ❖ **Seek out support.** Sometimes we avoid others while we are grieving or believe we must make a show of strength around friends and family. We may believe that no one wants to be with us when we are down. The truth is there are people who are willing to support us. It helps to keep in contact with close friends and supportive family members and to seek out grief support groups and classes. Books, handouts, and other information on grief are useful as well. It often helps to know that others experience grief in similar ways.
- ❖ **Be our own support.** With diligence and will power, we can learn to find gratitude in our daily lives and appreciate times of solitude. For many, time in nature supports the healing process. Gardening, nature hikes, walks in the park, or simply looking out at trees and flowers are all activities that we can enjoy in solitude. Engaging in the arts is another way to support ourselves. Writing, reading, painting, browsing art books, playing or listening to music are all ways of helping ourselves. Pampering ourselves occasionally with a sauna, a massage, a trip to a spa or hot springs can be very relaxing. Sometimes we may want to wear or hold an article of clothing that belonged to the person who died. It can be comforting to feel it, smell it and remember.
- ❖ **Know that grief is a journey.** Often we find that we have no interest in things we once enjoyed. We may experience detachment from much that normally held meaning for us. We just feel like giving up. At another moment we find ourselves protesting our circumstances with tears, anger, confusion, or denial. This can be followed by depression and a sense of despair. Along with this cycle of changing emotions may come physical manifestations of nausea, sleep disturbances, weakness, pain, and loss of appetite. Sometimes it feels as if we are trapped on a roller coaster. At times we simply have to wait it out. We can help ourselves through this by waiting on making major changes in our lives, by planning ahead for anniversaries, birthdays, holidays and other difficult dates and reminders of our loss. We must be patient with ourselves and remember that there is no quick fix for our grief. However, we can take a break from our grief by going to a movie, a sporting event or participating in other activities that we enjoy or that may make us laugh. Laughter helps us to heal. Helping others, taking on new challenges, and developing our interests are all ways we can manage the journey.
- ❖ **Know the danger signs.** Poor self care, withdrawal, isolation, continuous depression, frequent suicidal thoughts, recklessness, alcohol and/or drug abuse or dependence are all indicators that professional help and additional support are needed.

### *6. Helping Others Who Are Grieving*

- ❖ Encourage them to take their time in making changes and decisions, such as removing their loved ones belongings, selling or buying property, and changing jobs.
- ❖ Listen when they tell of experiences where they may have seen, heard, or felt the presence of the person who died. This is normal and happens for many, but not all who are mourning.
- ❖ Speak of the person who died and encourage the bereaved to reminisce and tell stories about them. Share your own memories.
- ❖ Help them remember the person realistically. No one is perfect and we don't miraculously become so after death.
- ❖ Allow them to have bad days. In order to do the work of grieving, the suffering and sorrow must be experienced.
- ❖ Encourage them to continue living, loving, and finding joy in the simple things.
- ❖ Take the initiative to call, visit, and take the bereaved person on an outing they would normally enjoy.
- ❖ Share humor and laughter.

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