



The Sojourner Project

...help for the journey

The journey through grief

Grief is an intense and complex journey for most of us. We cannot complete this journey overnight, as much as we would like to. In order to successfully move through our grief, we need to take an active role in our own healing process. It helps to understand how human beings respond to loss; most of us have questions about whether our feelings and reactions are normal. Let us look at each part of the grief journey which requires something of us.

We react to our loss with shock, numbness, and disbelief. When we experience a trauma, one of our first reactions is to shut down or go numb. This cushions us from overwhelming feelings during early grief. We may feel as if we are on automatic pilot during the first weeks. Even an expected death is a shock. We just don't know how a particular loss is going to feel until the loss actually occurs. Part of us may feel that the loss is unreal, a nightmare or a terrible mistake. How long it takes each of us to come out of our numbness depends on the circumstances surrounding each loss.

We begin the difficult journey of understanding that our loss is real. As the numbness wears off, we begin to realize what the loss is going to mean to us. This explains why many bereaved persons feel worse after a few months have gone by. The reality of the loss starts to sink in. Part of us may still be looking for our deceased loved one to come back into our life again. We begin some of our hardest grieving at a point when the support we got immediately after the death has tapered off.

We allow ourselves to experience the pain of our grief in all of its forms. There are no shortcuts through the pain of loss. We can "stuff down" feelings and delay grieving, but the grief will not diminish until we burn through it by experiencing it fully. In a culture where we often equate pain with weakness, it is important to give ourselves permission to allow pain its natural course. Below are some common emotions and behaviors that make up grief:

<i>Emptiness</i>	<i>Change in appetite</i>	<i>Anger</i>	<i>Panicky thoughts</i>
<i>Disorganization</i>	<i>Change in sleep patterns</i>	<i>Guilt</i>	<i>Irritability</i>
<i>Disorientation</i>	<i>Inability to concentrate</i>	<i>Helplessness</i>	<i>Anxiety</i>
<i>Indecisiveness</i>	<i>Loss of interest in life</i>	<i>Depression</i>	<i>Extreme loneliness</i>
<i>Anxiety</i>	<i>Questioning of belief system</i>	<i>Vulnerability</i>	<i>Feeling abandoned</i>

Pain is also expressed through our physical body. It is common to have strong physical reactions to grief. It is always a good idea to get a physical exam to assess the physical impact of the stress we have been under and to relieve fears about our own health.

We identify how our environment has changed and begin to develop new roles, routines, and skills in response to the changes. Losses tear apart the fabric of the routines around which our life is structured. They rob us of our comfortable roles. Any changes, especially involuntary ones, disrupt the flow of our life. Our responsibilities may seem to have doubled overnight. Grieving the loss of our routines is an essential part of healing. It is helpful to minimize change elsewhere in our life when we are faced with a loss. Also it is important to be gentle and patient with ourselves as we establish new roles and routines and take on additional responsibilities. We are often forced to start a new identity as part of our recovery. We learn what we must do to survive in our changed world.

We eventually come to a point where we choose to say "YES" to life again. Grieving is terribly hard, exhausting work and initially demands much of our energy. When enough healing has occurred, we no longer focus as much of our energy on our loss. At this point, we find renewed energy to invest in the life ahead of us. We come to understand that it is possible for us to achieve a happy full life again, though it will be different from our life before our loss.

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