

TIP SHEET FOR GRIEF AND LOSS

What is grief?

Grief is a normal reaction to an irretrievable loss. The most intense reactions often happen with the death of a loved one, however grief is also associated with other losses such as the loss of a partner through separation or divorce, the death of a pet, the loss of a job, home or friendship or the loss of health through a disability.

Experiencing grief?

Everybody grieves differently. There are no particular feelings that a person should experience. There is also no set pattern or specific time frame for grieving.

Although the experience of grief is a natural process it can be extremely painful particularly in the early stages. However, over time the feelings will slowly become less intense.

The process is often not smooth as your feelings may fluctuate rapidly and intensely. You may find that you may begin to feel happy again, only to plunge into despair the following day or even the same day. This roller coaster experience can feel quite confusing.

Grief reactions are often particularly intense around anniversaries of the loss, birthdays, celebrations and other significant times.

Common grief reactions

These may include

- Denial, shock - particularly in the early stages, when the loss is so new.
- Sadness and depression - you may cry frequently, although not everybody cries to express sadness. You may experience fatigue, insomnia, oversleeping, loss of interests, forgetfulness, and not want to be with people.
- A loss of interest in goals that were previously important.
- A sense of unreality - you can feel as though you are not part of the world and people around you are just 'shadow people'
- Despair, helplessness
- Anxiety - worrying about small issues, difficulty in making decisions, bodily reactions such as headaches, a lack of energy, a lump in your throat, difficulty in taking a deep breath, nausea, panic attacks, gain or loss of appetite, worrying that you are going mad.
- An acute awareness of your own mortality and an associated fear of death
- Yearning for and even searching for the person who is no longer with you
- A sense of isolation from friends and feeling as if they don't understand your pain
- Restlessness and an inability to relax
- Guilt - this may involve worrying persistently over what you could have done differently in the past such as "if only I took him to the doctor earlier".
- Anger - this can involve a strong sense of injustice and anger with the world and even anger at the person who has died
- A preoccupation with thoughts of your loss
- Trying to give a meaning to your loss or make sense of your loss
- Feeling out of control and worrying that you are going mad

Where can I get help from others?

- Talk to a counsellor at the Newcastle campus telephone 4921 5801 or at the Central Coast campus 4348 4060.
- Make an appointment to see your doctor.
- Lifeline 131 114 offers a 24-hour service, as do the Psychiatric Emergency Centre (1 800 655 085) for the Hunter region or the Central Intake (4320 3500) for the Central Coast area.

What other resources are available?

Websites

www.grief.org.au

www.grieflink.asn.au

www.nalag.org.au

Books

Judy Tatelbaum

Kushner, H.S.

McKissock, D. and M.

The Courage to Grieve London: Cedar Books

When Bad Things Happen to Good People London: Pan

Coping with Grief Sydney: ABC Books.

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Ways to cope with grief

- Don't be frightened of your grief reactions. Although they may be extremely intense and painful, they are quite normal.
- Try not to be impatient. With time, the intensity of your grief will lessen.
- Express your feelings in a way that feels comfortable for you. Try not to suppress your emotions. Don't feel guilty however if you find it hard to cry. Everybody has their own way of handling grief. Some people find that expressing grief through writing, art or some other creative way can help.
- Share your grief with close friends and family. Let them support you in practical ways as well. Give yourself permission to ask them for help.
- If your loss is because someone has died, going on in life can feel like you are leaving this person behind, or forgetting them. Take some time to think about them and what they have contributed to your life. The qualities they have given you are never left behind.
- Eat nutritious meals and exercise as much as possible, even if it is just a short walk around the block. This will reduce the likelihood of getting an illness as your immune system is compromised during the grieving process. Exercise also reduces physical tension as well as anxiety and depression.
- Be gentle on yourself. Accept that you can't function at your best. Reduce your expectations by limiting more demanding activities, either at work or at home.
- Try to maintain some regular, basic routines. This will help you feel more secure and part of the world.
- Join a support group where you can talk to people who have experienced a similar grief.
- Take time out – nurture yourself by doing something that you normally enjoy, even if at first you are not very motivated.
- Avoid making major decisions such as moving house or changing jobs.
- If you don't have anyone with whom to share your grief or you are concerned that you are burdening family or friends, make an appointment to see a counsellor.

Ways to help someone who is grieving

- Be supportive. People are often anxious when they first approach a grieving person, as they are frightened of saying or doing the 'wrong' thing. Just acknowledging the person's loss is the first step. This may involve visiting, phoning, sending a card or helping with practical matters such as providing a meal, assisting with childcare.
- Provide ongoing support, not just in the early stages. Often grief is most intense about four to six weeks after a death, when the grieving person begins to re-establish a daily routine.
- Be a good listener. Don't underestimate the healing qualities of listening and just being with the grieving person.
- Allow the person to grieve in their own time. Don't try to rush the process. Grieving does not have a timetable.
- Don't be afraid to talk about the loss.
- Don't make judgements about their grief such as "I thought you'd be feeling better by now". Everybody grieves differently.
- Avoid platitudes such as "at least he didn't suffer or "he had a good life". This only tends to minimise the loss.
- Make allowances for the grieving person. They may be uncharacteristically snappy, argumentative, unmotivated or anxious. Try not to take this personally.
- If you are also grieving, make sure that you have support for yourself, both practical and emotional.

Grief and Study

You may find that the intensity of your grief will make it very difficult to concentrate on your university or TAFE studies. It is common to feel unmotivated to study as the significance of a loss may overshadow and temporarily make any personal goals or interest in learning insignificant. Suggestions to assist you in coping with study at this time include:

- Accept that you will not be able to function at your optimal level. Be gentle on yourself – pushing too hard may only lead to unnecessary anxiety.
- If you are concerned about failing or submitting late assignments, apply for extensions or special consideration. University students can apply online at the 'Current Student' page on The University of Newcastle website. TAFE students can speak directly to their teacher.
- As much as possible try to attend lectures, tutorials and labs. The routine and structure often helps. You may wish to notify academic staff of your loss.
- Ask fellow students for assistance with notes or with anything else you may need, associated with your studies.