



Life after Loss: Healthy Grieving

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It doesn't matter how you look at it, grieving hurts and anyone who has suffered the death of a loved one or the loss of a relationship, knows this. It can hurt so much, we wonder if we will ever stop feeling this way. Fortunately, the answer to this question is an emphatic yes! However, there is no easy way through the process. It is difficult but it can be managed well. To manage it well is to experience healthy grief or "good" grief, whereas to manage it poorly, or not at all, is to leave it unresolved with the ensuing consequences.

Few people are prepared for the loss of a loved one, whether it is sudden or anticipated. In addition, it is important to remember that as humans, we are all different so each person's response to loss will be different also. There is no right or wrong way to grieve and no one mourns exactly like you. Gender differences in the grief process highlight this fact. Unfortunately, when it comes right down to it, we want people to grieve the way we do. We want to know that we are doing it "right". So when others have their own process, we are confused about what we are supposed to do and how to support them. When there is the tragic loss of a child, couples frequently don't know how to help each other or understand what the other is going through, which unfortunately then creates other problems.

So, what expectations about grieving should you have? Therese Rando, Ph.D., a bereavement specialist and author of numerous studies and books on loss and survival puts forth the following realistic expectations for the grief process: First, grief is not short term; it will, in all likelihood, take longer than one expects. In addition, it involves many changes and is continuously developing. Grieving also takes more emotional energy than one might ever have imagined thus fatigue is often present. Grief shows itself in all spheres of your life; not only the psychological but the social and physical also. People also grieve for not only what they have lost already, but also for what is lost for the future – the plans, hopes and dreams and the needs that will go unmet because of the loss. Thus grief is not just the death or loss alone, it is also for many things both symbolic and tangible; for example, the loss of one's role and identity as a wife or husband, or mother or father, girlfriend, boyfriend, son, daughter, etc.

Emotions are another area where expectations are often unrealistic. Emotions that one might expect throughout the process may be combinations of anger and depression, whether irritability, annoyance or intolerance, or anger and guilt. Sometimes, one may feel a lack of concern or not feel the loss at all and you will wonder if you cared enough. At other times, there may be sharp upsurges of grief that occur with no warning and you wonder if you are going crazy. Memory and concentration may be troublesome as well as decision making. Furthermore, it is not unrealistic to experience upsurges of grief around certain dates and anniversaries. Whether it is certain holidays or family times, or dates that were just special to you, anniversary grief is common and should be expected. Our society often has unrealistic expectations about our mourning and so at times responds inappropriately. People often report this as troubling. Society as a whole does not hold the same expectations as noted above, it expects the process to be short term and that everything is back to "normal" in just a week or so. In addition, our society often minimizes the significance of the loss of a pet. It isn't insignificant. Our pets are special members of our family. In our culture, people seem so uncomfortable with the natural process of loss and try to avoid it at all costs. I have frequently heard from people that one of the most difficult things they encounter after the loss of a loved one is how people avoid it when all that is needed is nothing more than even a brief acknowledgement of the loss.

Grief is painful to both the body and soul but in order to grieve in a healthy way, it is important not to fight it or hide it away. Give yourself permission to hurt. For those who usually control their feelings a lot, this is particularly important. Recognize that it is a natural process and your body and soul knows just what to do if you allow them to do their jobs. Actively share the experience with trusted family and friends or write in a journal. In this way, the healing comes. If you attempt to avoid or deny the pain and grief, or deny the loss then problems may ensue. While the motivation for this may be an attempt to avoid letting go of your lost loved one, which is perfectly understandable, additional problems may arise leading to unresolved grief.

In summary, there is no way around the pain of loss, but there is a way through it. Be compassionate with yourself and others, understand that we are all different and that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Find the best way for yourself so that you can accept your loss and move into your future remembering the wonderful memories of your past.

Source: How to Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies by Therese A. Rando, Ph.D., (Bantam Books 1991)

