



## **South Okanagan Loss Society**

### **Grief: Understanding Your Emotions**

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#### **The Feelings of Grief**

When someone close to you dies, you grieve. Grief is the road that you travel from how things were to how things will be. On this journey, you may have different or stronger feelings than you've had before. You may wonder if what you are feeling is normal.

Your feelings may surprise, frighten or embarrass you, showing up at times or in ways that you don't expect. It may be that you find yourself crying more – or less – than you expected. You may have deep feelings that you can't or don't want to show.

Feelings can be uncomfortable but they are not harmful. Remember that feelings are neither good nor bad, right nor wrong – they are just feelings. They are a normal and necessary part of grief. Instead of trying to stop them, trust that just as each one comes, it will also go.

Whatever your feelings, they are tied to the particular relationship or connection that you had with the person who died. In the sections that follow, some common emotions are identified along with suggestions to help you make room for the feelings you may have.

If you are experiencing other feelings, you may still find some of this information useful. If you find that you are continuing to struggle with your feelings, consider meeting with a bereavement counsellor to find new ways of coping.

## **Sorrow**

The pain of sorrow is heartache. You may feel that your heart is broken or injured. You may feel as though you are no longer a whole person. You may express your sorrow outwardly through weeping, crying, sobbing or wailing; or you may pour your sorrow less visibly into activities that may be ordinary or special to you.

You may long for the person who has died to be with you again. You may miss the sharing of day-to-day life or the sense of closeness that comes from loving and being loved by someone. You may miss being able to provide and receive care. There may be times when the person's absence seems overpowering. You may feel as though there is an enormous hole in your life or that you simply don't belong anywhere now.

Some other words that you might use to describe sorrow include sadness, emptiness or loneliness.

### **What May Help:**

- Honour your sadness. Accept that it is a natural and unavoidable part of having loved someone and that it is part of your life right now.
- Share your experiences. You may want to share your sadness with friends, family or members of a grief support group; or you may prefer to use the internet, or take up a project or activity that allows you to maintain a greater sense of privacy.
- Express your sorrow. It's important to find ways that meet your needs and match your personality. You may need a regular time and place to feel sad and to cry, such as in your morning shower or at the grave; or you may need time to quietly meditate or reflect while walking in nature. If you want to express strong emotions, avoid doing this too close to bedtime since this can disturb your sleep.
- Create ways of remembering. Find ways that help you to remember and honour the person who died. Talk or write to him, celebrate her birthday, put up a Christmas stocking, display photographs, talk about him or her.

## **Hopelessness and Despair**

As you face changes resulting from your loss, it may seem that your world has changed so much that you barely recognize it. You may feel that all you held most dear has been

lost. Some people describe their feelings as 'being lost' or 'in a dark place.' Other people feel tired and unmotivated. Things that once mattered may now seem pointless. You may feel as if your world is falling apart and you'll never feel happy again.

Dealing with your grief may be harder than you expected and it may be difficult to put your feelings into words. You may feel depressed and have trouble keeping up your normal routines. You may feel that life no longer holds any purpose for you and wonder how long you can go on this way. You may even hope to die or have thoughts of ending your life.

If your mood is low, dark or numb most or all of the time, you may be depressed (as well as grieving). Most often these empty, hopeless feelings lessen as people begin to "see light in the tunnel" and re-engage with the world.

### **What May Help:**

- Accept and honour your feelings. Although it may not be apparent to you, you are in the midst of an important transition. This can be a time to reflect on the past and how it can help you to create your future.
- Let others know and help. Spend time with others who have been through a similar experience and survived it. This could include family members or friends; or you may want to join a bereavement support group. Even characters in movies or books can fill this role.
- Do what's right for you. It's important to give thought and time to whatever is good for you. Identify what you need: It might be rest or quiet time; or it might be physical or social activity. Staying in touch with the rhythms of the natural world and the cycle of life can be restorative and inspiring. You may also want to record your thoughts, observations and progress in some way.
- Talk to your family doctor. If your mood is often down or you are having thoughts of ending your life, seek help as soon as possible from your family doctor or hospital emergency department. Crisis lines can also provide telephone support:
  - Central Vancouver Island Crisis Line: 1-888-494-3888 (toll free)
  - Provincial Suicide Intervention Line: 1- 800-784-2433 (toll free)

### **Guilt and Blame**

The time leading up to someone's death is often confusing, exhausting, stressful and filled with unclear and difficult choices. Under such circumstances, it's often impossible to make good choices or to know the 'right' thing to do.

While grieving, it is natural to keep re-examining what has happened, including your part in it. You may have many 'what if' or 'why' questions. You may be wondering about 'if only.' You may have regrets about things done and not done, or said and not said.

If you are feeling angry with others, you may be trying to understand what happened: What exactly was the cause of death? Were any warning signs missed or not taken seriously enough?

Feelings of guilt or blame often come from a belief that everything in life happens for a reason. Something life-changing has happened and you are trying to understand how and why. You may blame yourself or others, even though you know there isn't any one thing or person to blame. If you are someone who likes to always get things right, feelings of guilt or blame may be especially hard for you.

Feelings of guilt and blame about the death may also come up if you don't feel good about who you are or what you have to offer others. If your relationship with the person who died was difficult, you may feel guilty about times when you wished him or her dead.

Feelings of guilt and blame are often tied to ideas about how you or other people should be. Perhaps you are telling yourself you should feel more sad or less angry, or that you shouldn't be grieving in this way or for so long. Often these 'shoulds' are the echoes of what you've been hearing from family and friends.

It's also possible that your feelings of guilt are grounded in reality: As a caregiver, you may have been tired and said something hurtful or not listened to a complaint. Perhaps you did or didn't do something that contributed to someone's pain, illness or death.

### **What May Help:**

- Examine your guilt. Pay attention to what you say to yourself and about yourself. Describe what you feel guilty about and examine it. Look at what you are guilty of – the real part – and decide what you need to do about this.
- Forgive yourself or others. Feelings of guilt or blame can keep you stuck in your grief. Ask yourself if these feelings are helping you to be the person you want to be. If not, find ways to forgive. When guilt or blame surface, practice letting go, as you are ready.
- Do a reality check. Ask trusted friends and family if they have ever experienced something similar and find out how they handled the situation. Also talk to other people who were involved and find out if anyone sees things differently than you do. Recall not only the times when you or someone else failed, but also those times when you or they did or said what was needed.
- Take action. Once you have carefully examined your feelings, you may still feel there is good reason for your guilt. In this situation you may want to find ways to make amends, for example, by volunteering with, making a donation to or learning more about a cause that mattered to the person who died. You might also decide to make a change in your lifestyle or behaviour based on what you've learned.

## Anger

Anger can be a natural and common response to loss. It is a normal reaction at times when you feel powerless, frustrated or wronged in some way. Even so, it may be difficult for you and others to accept or tolerate the expression of angry feelings.

Your anger may be directed at a certain person, agency or policy. There may (or may not) be valid reasons for this. You may feel that someone should be accountable for actions taken or not taken, such as medical treatment or other decisions. You may feel disillusioned or let down by the care provided to the person who died by a physician or other service provider. You may feel angry with the person who died for not taking better care of him- or herself. You may feel angry with family members for what they did or didn't do or say. You may feel angry with yourself, thinking that there was something you should or shouldn't have done or said. You may feel angry with God.

It's also possible that you may feel angry and not know (or not want to know) who you're angry with or what you're angry about. For example, you may simply be angry that the person died and you can't see or speak or talk with him or her anymore. In these instances, you may try to tell yourself that you shouldn't feel angry; but when anger isn't understood or expressed, it can become more intense and unpredictable. You may find yourself exploding in situations where normally you wouldn't.

Anger can protect or distract you from other, painful feelings, such as sadness, loneliness or despair. If you're not yet ready to feel these other emotions, anger can be a way to hold them back. This isn't wrong – it's just a way of coping.

Some other words that might describe your anger are irritation, frustration, resentment, upset, tiredness or disappointment.

### What May Help:

- Be safe. Take steps to prevent your anger from hurting you or other people. Learn about what you can do with these feelings when they surface: Go for a walk or spend time in a soothing environment. Stop activities such as driving. Take a few slow breaths. Try writing or journaling about whatever is on your mind. You might need to take a 'time out' by putting some distance between you and someone else. Tell the other person you need time out and when you will return. Then walk away.
- Defuse your anger. Find ways to safely let the steam off. Physical activities that use big muscle groups are great. Try racket sports, running, yoga or aerobics. If your physical health isn't strong, you might try gentler activities such as walking, stretching or swimming. Repetitive actions are good: Hammering, chopping, digging and kneading can help to release some of the energy that builds up with anger.
- Express yourself. Tell the whole story. Be specific about all of your thoughts and feelings. Tell the story until you are clear about your anger: What and who is it about? Try doing this through letter writing, journaling, art projects or conversation with a counsellor or trusted friend. This may help you to see the situation more clearly and to decide if you need or want to do anything about it.

- Take constructive action. Once you've found clarity about your anger and what you want to do, identify the specific steps you need to take. You might send a letter to someone or you might work towards creating a change in education, policy or procedure. This may also be a time for forgiveness, letting go or acceptance of what can't be changed.

## **Fear, Worry and Anxiety**

Fear is a powerful emotion. When you feel afraid, you may have strong physical reactions such as a racing or pounding heart, rapid breathing, sweaty hands or upset stomach. You may also feel nervous, anxious, panicky or tearful.

Fear usually alerts you to a danger but when you're grieving, you may feel afraid even though there seems to be no danger present. You may feel anxious about leaving your home, going to new places or being around people. You may also be afraid of the intensity of your own emotions and wonder if you're going crazy. You may worry about losing control, thinking that if you let your feelings out you won't be able to stop them.

You may feel scared by certain thoughts or memories of the person who died, their illness or their death. You may worry that these memories are all you have left of the person. You may also worry about illnesses or risks that normally wouldn't concern you, or you may have thoughts that you or another person in your life will die. These worries and fears are a natural response to your experience with someone else's death, and will gradually lessen over time.

### **What May Help:**

- Name your fear. Any time you feel fearful or worried, stop what you are doing and simply notice. Breathe slowly and deeply, and ask yourself, "What is going on with me right now?" If you think you are having anxiety or panic attacks, ask your doctor or a counsellor for help and advice.
- Ask questions and take action. Ask yourself questions such as: "Am I doing or not doing anything to cause myself to feel scared or worried? What do I need right now? Is there anything I can do at this time to dispel or lessen my fear? Is there anywhere I can go? Who can help and what can they do? What other kinds of help are available to me?" Using these questions, order your thoughts and then take small, focused steps to lessen your fears or worries. As you begin to take action, you may find that your feelings change.
- Identify what helps you. Pay attention to what helps you feel better or worse. Does it feel better to be alone or with other people? Does it help to tell yourself that you are safe, that there is no danger, that you are OK? Is there a person you can call or some physical activity you can do, such as going for a walk or cleaning the house? Would it help to hold on to someone or something for comfort such as a partner, pillow, teddy bear or pet? Would a bath or massage help? Is prayer, music or meditation a comfort?

- Learn breathing and relaxation techniques. For example, throughout the day, take time to breathe slowly and deeply. Take a big breath in through your nose and let it out through your mouth with a sigh. Repeat until you feel more relaxed.

You may also wish to visit the BC Anxiety website: <http://www.anxietybc.com>

## **Making Room for Your Feelings**

Whatever feelings you may have, remember that they are just feelings and that they will come and go. One thing you can count on is that your feelings will change. You won't always feel the way you do right now. Eventually, the strong emotions that are so difficult now will ease their hold on you, making life easier again.

With thanks and appreciation~

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