Duke University Health System Bereavement

Understanding Grief and Mourning

Since grief is not well tolerated in our society, a bereaved person is usually expected to recover quickly from their loss. Often, the signs of grief are not recognized, or mislabeled as "stress" or "anxiety." The following is basic information about grief and mourning, so that you can better understand your feelings and behavior.

GRIEF is the reaction (physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual) to a death or other significant loss.

MOURNING is the process used to cope with the loss and grief, and adjust to the loss.

Common Grief Reactions

Feelings, thoughts and emotions – that may feel overwhelming at times:

Denial	*Bitterness*	*Restlessness*	*Isolation*	*Resentment*
Anger	*Irritability*	*Deep sadness*	*Loneliness*	*Mood swings*
Guilt	*Depression*	*Disbelief*	*Confusion*	*Crying*
Hopelessness	*Forgetfulness*	*Sense of failure*		*Intense dreaming*
Short attention span		*Decreased self-esteem*		
Inability to make decisions		*Preoccupation with the deceased*		

Physical reactions:

Lack of energy	*Heart palpitation*	*Weakness*	*Dry mouth*
Appetite changes	*Sleeping problems*	*Blurred vision*	*Aching feelings*
Fatigue	*Muscle weakness*	*Shortness of breath*	

Behavioral changes:

Absenteeism from work	*Keeping busy to avoid feelings*
New or increased use of substance or alcohol	*Conflict*

What May I Expect?

- Tears are healthy and appropriate during this time. Take time to cry in private, or with those who will comfort and support you.
- Appetite may change – either increase or decrease.
- Sleeping patterns may change – you may find that you sleep more or have problems sleeping (i.e., waking up and not being able to return to sleep).
- Your energy levels may decrease, or you may not feel like doing anything.

- Problems concentrating – you may start projects and be unable or uninterested in finishing them.
- Life may not seem to be worthwhile or meaningful. This can be a normal reaction of acute grief, and will diminish with time.
- You may have intense feelings of anger – at doctors, nurses, family members, or even the baby (for leaving you). Sometimes people are even angry with themselves.
- Some people find their faith challenged as they question past values and beliefs.

What is Mourning?

Mourning is the outward expression of grief. Examples of common mourning rituals in our society are funerals and memorial services. Personal rituals include keeping a journal, writing poetry, or a letter to the deceased, cooking a special meal on birthdays or anniversaries, lighting a candle to mark an event, making a quilt or a scrapbook. Mourning takes time, energy and attention.

Mourning rituals help the bereaved person cope with their grief, and move into a new world and life that has hope and meaning for them. The following is adapted from J. William Worden's "Tasks of Mourning" and are guidelines to normalize and understand why mourning is important.

1. ***Accept the Reality of the Loss***
   - Acceptance must be both intellectual and emotional.
   - Belief and disbelief that death has occurred are intermittent during this task.
   - It can be helpful to know and understand the circumstances of the death.

2. ***Experience the Pain and Grief***
   - Identify, feel, accept and find ways to express the different physical and psychological reactions to the loss.
   - Funerals and memorial services provide community support and recognition of one's grief.
   - Identify and mourn secondary losses (losses that may occur as a result of the death like economic change, relocate, lose friends/family, loss of identity/status, etc.).

3. ***Adjust to the Environment Without the Deceased***
   - Create and share realistic memories of the deceased and your life together.
   - Acknowledge a new relationship and identity with friends and family.
   - Recognize and accept that one's feelings, beliefs and values about the world may have changed.

4. ***Reinvest in Your Life***

   - You may experience a sense of release and find yourself moving on with life.
   - You will have renewed energy and begin feeling "normal" again, although this is a "new normal" because your loved one is no longer with you.
   - You will find yourself able to plan for the future.

Healing Begins When You:

- Express your feelings
- Learn more about grief and its effects
- Are patient with yourself
- Ask for help when you need it
- Stay alert to your physical needs

Remember To Call Your Doctor If You:

- Continue to experience intense yearning for the deceased that does not diminish over time.
- Are unable to take care of yourself or your family.
- Have persistent thoughts about harming yourself.
- Become very depressed and are unable to function.
- Start to use, or increase the use of, alcohol or other drugs.