



Duke University Health System

Bereavement

Helping Yourself – After the death of a loved one

Grieving can be a frightening experience. It affects every aspect of your lives. During the journey towards healing, it is important to take care of yourself both physically and emotionally.

How do I take care of myself?

- ◆ *Mourning takes time* – sometimes longer than you might think. Be gentle with yourself in the coming days, weeks, and months and give yourself the needed time. Treat yourself as you would your very best friend
- ◆ *Carry or wear a linking object* – something that belonged to your loved one, if that is something that brings you comfort
- ◆ *Take care of yourself physically* by:
 - Eat a healthy diet – to include milk, protein, vegetables, fruit, and whole grains.
 - Get needed rest – although you may be pre-occupied with your loved one's death.
 - Talk with your doctor if you have any questions about not getting enough sleep
 - Exercise daily – physical activity can refresh you and take your mind off your pain for a while. Activities such as a walk around the block, swimming, working out, or whatever you enjoy doing are helpful
 - Avoid over-use of alcohol or medication. They tend to numb your emotions and delay your grief work. Delaying grief work may create new problems down the road. If you think that you need medication – talk to your doctor
- ◆ *Talk about your feelings*, and your loved one, as you need to. It can be with your family or friends. You may want to consider talking to someone outside the family who is not personally involved.
- ◆ *Write down your thoughts and feelings* – Some people find this helpful because they find it easier than talking. Ways of doing this is by:
 - ▣ Keeping a journal or diary
 - ▣ Writing letters to your loved one
 - ▣ Writing any types of notes or poems
- ◆ *Read* - books, articles, or poems that comfort you. Reading about how others have dealt with their grief will let you know that you are not alone.
- ◆ *Look to your faith* (whatever you perceive that to be) – and maintain your spiritual bonds. The following may help with closure:
 - Religious services and ceremonies – i.e. memorial service
 - Quiet prayer and meditation
 - Involvement in activities in your place of worship
- ◆ *Accept comfort and help from others* – admit when you are feeling lonely or are in pain. Your family and friends love you and want to help. Share with them what does and does not help you.



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- ◆ ***Give yourself permission*** to laugh as well as cry – Both are a part of being human.
- ◆ **Delay making major decisions** (for at least a year, if possible) – allow yourself time to understand everything that has happened and you are ready to make those decisions. Some people need time in order to make the decisions that are appropriate for them.

What can I do if I need help?

Some people find it helpful to explore feelings and thoughts with someone outside the family who is not directly involved and who understands (a minister, counselor, or support group). Know that you are not alone. There are people available to you who understand and care.

Call your local hospital or mental health agency to get more information. Some suggestions include:

- **Support groups** – where bereaved people help each other by sharing their experiences.
- **Hospice** - often provides bereavement services for families who have experienced the death of a loved one.
- **Religious advisers** – who can help identify spiritual resources that may be comforting for you.
- **Bereavement counselors** – specialists who help people adjust to the death of a loved one.
- **Local mental health associations** – to get more information and referrals.

Should I try to forget or keep my memories alive?

After someone you love dies – they will **always** remain a part of your life. Memories are all you have now – **treasure** them.

- Share your memories with family and friends, as you need to.
- Collect meaningful items that remind you of your loved one and that you find comforting. Keep all the precious things in a *memory box*.
- Begin symbolic acts to serve as a tribute to your loved one's life i.e.:
- Lighting a candle at times that would comfort you,
- Plant something as a living memorial i.e. flowers, a bush or tree

Remember to **Call your doctor** if you:

- Are unable to take care of yourself or your family
- Have persistent thoughts of or are planning to hurt yourself
- Become very depressed and are unable to function