

“Coping with Grief and Loss”

**By: Gina L. Spielman, LCSW, C.H.
Gina L. Spielman, LCSW & Assoc., Ltd.**

Feelings of grief and loss can surface after many types of life events. The obvious life event is the death of a loved one. But it can also surface after a divorce or relationship ending, loss of limb, loss of physical/mental functioning, illness, loss of job, relocation, loss of pet, etc...

Because this is one of my specialties, about half of my clients come in with grief/loss as the presenting problem. Most of the time I reassure the person that they are not going crazy, and that he/she is just in the grief process, which is normal. Sometimes just a few sessions will allow the grief-stricken individuals to vent things that are troubling them. I also provide education to these clients as to the grief process and stages of grief, what to expect, how to cope and self-care, and how to ask for what they need from others.

The Stages of Grief:

Everyone is different as to how fast they move through the stages and sometimes they are not in order. Even though the word “stages” is the most common way to describe the grief process, it seems to give the impression that the issues of grief are handled in an orderly fashion with a definite and identifiable beginning and end. Nothing is further from the truth. All stages can be experienced in the course of just a short time. Also, even if a person has worked through a stage, it can resurface again when triggered. The “stages” are:

Numbness/shock

The body's natural defense system insulates in the initial stages of a trauma. The brain may run on "automatic pilot" and later not even remember what happened when the news of the loss was first heard.

Denial/disbelief

Disbelief may be experienced: "That can't be true..... that's not possible ... there must be some mistake ... "

Pain/anguish

As the numbness fades, there may be deep pain, stomach pains and cramps, feeling out of breath, feeling crushed, or a sense of emptiness.

Anger

There may be anger at the messenger who delivers the news, a doctor, the person who “caused” the pain (even if that person is now deceased), at anyone that can be held “responsible” for the loss, even at God.

Bargaining

Negotiating the situation, either with another person involved, or with God: "Please give me one more chance and I promise things will be different ... I will change ... If you will reverse this, then I will do this in return ..."

Depression/guilt

When it is realized that the loss is real and unchanging, there may be deep sorrow. There may be guilt, remorse, or regret. There may be a feeling like life is over. Some may even feel so hopeless as to consider ending their lives.

Acceptance

Coming to terms with the reality of the situation, recognizing it as a fact, and gradually letting go of the struggle, moving beyond suffering and finding some peace, even with new circumstances.

Hope

Acceptance of the reality of current circumstances leading to a renewed hope for the future, even though different from what was imagined. Also, the ability to once again call upon spiritual beliefs about the future.

Help for Grievers:

Counseling and support groups are some of the best ways to help with grief and loss. There they can connect with others who share similar experiences, and also be allowed and encouraged to tell their stories as much and as often as needed. If the death/loss was particularly traumatic or the relationship was complicated, professional counseling is probably needed and can be quite helpful. Also, certain educational books and websites can be helpful.

How long does grieving take? There is no timetable for bereavement. Usually, grief diminishes over time, but this does not, in any way, disrespect the loss. Some spiritual traditions recognize a particular time marker, such as a certain number of weeks or a full year, as a guide for bereavement. Also remember that the anniversary date of a loss may be a difficult time for many years.

Regardless of the type of loss, emotional support is essential. This can come from family or friends, from groups of others who have experienced similar losses, or working with a Therapist or Grief Counselor. If the intensity of your grief does not seem to be diminishing (for example, if you continue to have trouble with eating, sleeping, feelings of guilt, or impairment in daily functioning), it is important to consult with a professional such as a Therapist or Grief Counselor.

For Family Members and Friends:

The most difficult grief/loss cases I have seen are when there has been a death of someone's child and/or when there has been a suicide. The client is usually ridden with guilt feelings, and anger, which need to be processed. The feelings are so intense and strong that sometimes family members and friends seem to be afraid or uncomfortable and do not know what to do or say when they are observing such strong emotions. This sometimes results in family members and/or friends either avoiding the person, or saying something like "get over it and move on". Neither one of these actions will likely help the person who is grieving. Surprisingly enough, just simple things such as listening, being there, and saying "I hear you" or "I understand" is extremely helpful and supportive. It may actually help the person move through the grief faster and in a more healthy way. It is important for others to know that they do not have to "fix" the problem and do not have to try to make the person feel better. They also do not have to be a Therapist. Another thing to keep in mind is that the action of emotion being expressed is likely going to help the grieving person. So, it is helpful to listen with your heart, and not worry too much about what you will say. Just concentrate on the words that are being shared with you. Remember: unconditional support and understanding is important. Grievers may have to relate the same story over and over. Listen attentively each time, and remember you do not have to have the answer. Be aware of holidays and anniversaries as grievers may have a difficult time around special occasions. These events emphasize the absence of the

person. Respect the pain as a natural expression of the grief process, and do not try to take the hurt away. It is important to let the griever know that you are there for them and can offer help such as child care, transportation, food, flowers, etc... In addition, just something simple such as telling the griever “You are in my thoughts” can help more then you will ever know.

How can I learn more?

Contact: Gina L. Spielman, LCSW, C.H.
Licensed Clinical Social Worker & Certified Hypnotist
Gina L. Spielman, LCSW & Assoc., Ltd.
Website: www.ginaspielman.com
E-mail: gs@ginaspielman.com
Phone: (630) 212-7048