

Grief and Mourning

What is grief?

Grief is the normal, emotional response to a loss. Each person grieves in his or her own way. There is no right way to grieve. There is no specific timetable for completing the grief process. While grief is often associated with the death of a loved one, it may also be experienced at the time of other losses such as the loss of function due to illness, loss of a pet, loss through divorce, loss of future dreams or role changes, and many other changes in life or health.

What is mourning?

Mourning is the outward expression of grief and includes rituals and customs such as funerals, viewing of the body, cremation and other customs. Each religion, culture, ethnicity and even different parts of the same country may have different expressions of mourning.

What reactions may be expected during the grief process?

Grief affects a person's behavior, emotions, mental and physical well being.

Among the physical experiences are such things as:

- Tightness in the chest and throat, breathlessness
- Headaches and dizziness
- Exhaustion or weakness
- Dry mouth
- Muscle aches

Among the thoughts are:

- Disbelief and shock
- Confusion and difficulty concentrating
- Hallucinations
- Preoccupation with the deceased

Some of the emotions that are most often felt include:

- Sadness or helplessness
- Anger, which may be directed at God, family, health care providers, or the person who died
- Shock, guilt, or anxiety

- Numbness or ambivalence
- Yearning
- Shame
- Fear

Changes in behavior may include:

- Sleeping more or less
- Eating more or less
- Withdrawal from usual activities
- Crying
- Over activity or keeping busy
- Dreaming of the deceased

What can be done to help the healing process?

- Give yourself permission to grieve
- Get plenty of rest, exercise and eat a healthy diet
- Try to have at least one close person with whom you share your feelings and receive support
- Consider keeping a journal to write down your feelings
- Don't push yourself to make changes in your life too quickly
- Reminiscing and putting together a memory book provide an active way to heal
- Get information about the normal grief process
- Attend a community grief support group

What should be reported?

- Persistent intense grief reactions months after the loss (not just occasional intense grief reactions)
- Thoughts of suicide or self-harm
- Social isolation
- Unplanned changes in weight
- Increase in use of alcohol or drugs

Your team cares about your well-being long after your loss. Take care to ensure you recover from your loss by creating a “new normal” way of life.

Other HPNA Teaching Sheets on are available at www.HPNA.org.

Reference

Hospice and Palliative Nursing Assistant Core Curriculum. Pittsburgh, PA: Hospice and Palliative Nurses Association;2009.

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