

## AFTER THE FUNERAL

Grief is a natural reaction to the loss of a family member, partner or friend. Grieving is a normal process that will run its course eventually, although there are no magic timeframes. The timeframe of grief and the degree of pain experienced will be dependent on many factors including the type of relationship with the loved one, the way in which the loved one passed, personality, coping skills and whether the death was expected or unexpected. Grief can be described as standing by the ocean, sometimes it feels like a tidal wave that knocks you down, you are breathless and disorientated. Other times it feels like you have your head just above water but could be dragged under at any time. Some days the waves are up to your waist and it takes a lot of energy just to walk through them. And then there are days when the water is lapping at your feet but you are still able to focus on the beach and the horizon.



Grief can present in different ways for different people and can be displayed in physical, emotional behavioural and psychological ways. Typical grief reactions can include but are not limited to **EMOTIONAL**- feelings of shock, disbelief, fear, anger, depression, hopelessness, sadness, longing, guilt and feeling abandoned, empty or directionless

**PHYSICAL**- panic sensations, chest tightness, difficulty breathing, headaches, nausea, loss of appetite, sleep disturbances, constant crying, nightmares, restlessness and agitation

**BEHAVIOURAL**- withdrawal and isolation, avoidance of triggers of the loss, resentment towards others, feeling disconnected from others and misunderstood, feeling rejected or isolated by friends

**PSYCHOLOGICAL** -being preoccupied with the loss, thoughts that the pain will never end or that you can't cope, suicidal thoughts, difficulties with memory, concentration, planning, and decision making, flashbacks and painful memories, loss of interest and motivation.

## STAGES OF GRIEF

There are several typical stages of grief, although they do not necessarily occur in order and at times they overlap and re-occur.

### SHOCK/ NUMBNESS

An initial stage of shock occurs when you first find out the news. People often describe this as being in a zombie like state and some people appear to be functioning well on the outside. Our adrenaline process takes over and a feeling of numbness can prevail as a protection mechanism from the reality. This stage can last for a few days to a few weeks.

### DISBELIEF/DENIAL

It is natural to question the loss of a loved one and to be in a state of disbelief. Some people want to avoid any planning or involvement of a funeral due to this disbelief as these actions reinforce a painful reality. Common thoughts include "This can't be true" "This isn't happening" "I'll wake up and it will be a bad dream." This disbelief can extend to other people and a wondering how they can be going about their day to day business, or even be having fun, when your world has been changed forever and the pain is all consuming.

### ANGER/GUILT

It is very common to feel anger towards your loved one for leaving and for the pain you are experiencing, or turned inwards towards yourself i.e. "I'm furious that I did/didn't ...." Some people find that this anger is directed in other ways towards inanimate objects, family and friends, strangers or injustices within systems. Anger can also be directed towards a higher power and questioning of belief systems "why did you take my loved one", "Why is this happening to me?" , "This is so unfair"

Guilt can be very intense after the death of a loved one. The what if's and if only's can be preoccupying and lead to a variety of different imagined scenarios causing a great deal of pain. Depending upon the situation surrounding the death, some people experience survivor guilt for still being alive. In brief moments of pleasure you can be hit suddenly with intense guilt for enjoying yourself based upon the thoughts that you can't share that pleasure with your loved one or that he/she won't experience it ever again.

### BARGAINING

A normal reaction to intense pain is to try to regain control. It is common for people to 'bargain' in an attempt to reduce overwhelming feelings. Examples can include "I will never drink again if you bring him/her back/stop the

pain” “If I just keep busy it will get better” “if I finish off his/her project then it will be ok” “If I throw myself into this work/charity/event I can make it better”

### DEPRESSION

The depression, sadness and missing of a loved one can sometimes be the longest of the other stages. It is during this stage that the true magnitude of the loss is reflected upon. The first birthday, anniversary and holidays can be difficult reminders of the loss. Feelings of despair, hopelessness, emptiness and loneliness are common. Often withdrawal from friends and family and social events occurs as you reflect on the memories of your time together and grieve for the loss of future expectations.

### ACCEPTANCE/ADJUSTMENT

This last stage of grief occurs as you start to manage problems that occur as a result of the loss. You start to process the reality of the situation and gain hope that your future can be brighter. Acceptance does not mean forgetting, as this is impossible. Also, acceptance does not mean you will not ever feel the grief again, as many unexpected situations can trigger memories (i.e. a song, a car, an advert, birthdays/anniversaries, a phrase/comment etc). Acceptance is about adjusting and creating a meaningful life, re-evaluating values and using the loss to truly appreciate the importance of those we care for who are still in our lives. A good analogy of acceptance is that grief is like a massive black ink blot on a piece of paper. The ink blot covers most of the paper so that only a few white edges can be seen. That ink blot doesn't change. As we process the grief we learn how to add new white paper to the outside as we move through our life.

### COMPLICATED GRIEF

Several factors have been identified which can complicate the grieving process

- Avoidance- Throwing yourself into work/family/activities and being so busy that you don't have time to process the grief
- Numbing- Using drugs (prescription or illicit) or alcohol to numb the pain or to feel better
- Isolation- Poor family or social support, or being away from family support
- Conflict- Relationship, family or work conflict
- Closure- Unable to say goodbye or attend the funeral. In the case of an accident or trauma, difficulties finding out answers

### STRATEGIES TO PROCESS GRIEF

- **Look back in 'kind sight'**- Our mind naturally torments us with the what if's and if only's so try to show some compassion towards yourself and rather than being critical for past actions (or lack of), look kindly on these actions as being human and use this as a learning experience for the future.
- **Self-nurture**- Acknowledge that the pain you feel is what anyone would feel should they be in your position and that it is ok to have these feelings. Be kind and compassionate towards yourself and try to engage in little things to take care of yourself. If this is too much ask someone to help out with cooking and cleaning, or just coming and sitting with you.
- **Managing triggers/flashbacks**- Memories (even positive ones) can invoke the reality of the loss and before we are even aware we are caught in the thoughts and the pain overwhelms. A simple mindfulness technique of labelling the thoughts as 'a painful memory', acknowledge it's ok to feel this pain as it indicates how much you cared for the loved one, take two or three deep breathes and notice a few things you can see or hear which brings you back to the present moment allowing you to refocus on the task at hand.
- **Access social support** - Connect with those around you, especially when you don't feel like it. Isolation can intensify the grieving process. Seek out new supports that are non judgemental and understanding such as a support group or an online forum for people who have experienced something similar
- **Family members**- Acknowledge that immediate family members and those close to the loved one will grieve in different ways and in different timeframes. Acknowledge these differences without judging.
- **Nutrition**- the grieving process activates our fight or flight response which uses a lot of energy. Although you may not feel like eating, having small nutritious meals can help to restore this energy which makes it a just little easier to cope.

