

WHEN HAPPILY EVER AFTER ENDS

Grief can occur as a result of a change or loss in a variety of situations, the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship, a divorce, being made redundant or leaving a job, a life changing or life threatening illness, infertility, the loss of a house or belongings through flood/fire etc or a loss of a pet.



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 situation surrounding the loss/change, the degree of control you had over the loss, personality, coping skills and whether the loss was expected. The end of a relationship can be especially challenging as often your partner was a source of support during difficult times and you are left to face the separation without this support. Managing the impact on other family members such as children can also make this loss more difficult.

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

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**
- **DISBELIEF/DENIAL**
- **ANGER/GUILT**
- **BARGAINING**
- **DEPRESSION**
- **ACCEPTANCE/ADJUSTMENT**

It is natural to question yourself following a major loss and your self confidence can take a dive. People often wonder about things such as how will I ever get through this? How could I be a relationship again? What if I don't get another job? How will I manage this illness? Surround yourself with supportive understanding people who will provide reassurance and encouragement to take small steps to rebuild or recreate. Be clear with well meaning friends and family that this process will occur over time and don't take big step if you are not ready.

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

STRATEGIES TO PROCESS GRIEF

Stick to a routine- When there are massive changes in our lives a routine can help to provide the structure to adjust to the loss. Maintaining as much of your normal routine as possible will help to provide some structure especially if you feel helpless after the loss.

Manage other stress- It is easy to let the bills pile up or ignore other problems when you are feeling overwhelmed. The problem is that these things don't go away and often create more stress. Make a list of things you need to attend to and take small steps to resolve these issues, or ask someone for support to help put problem solving into action.

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. Try to do at least one thing a day that helps to promote your overall health, whether that is using a relaxation cd to help sleep, having a hot bath, drinking enough water, or watching a movie with a friend.

Journaling- Writing down your thoughts and feelings can be a simple yet effective way to process the loss and make sense of the situation. Our thoughts are often very 'heavy' when they are running through our mind like a fast train. These words can seem a little 'lighter' when we put them down on paper.

Exercise – During the initial stages of grief exercise is the last thing on your mind, however even just a 20 minute walk a day can help improve energy levels and sleep. As the grief starts to subside a little, try a yoga class or the gym- it not only gets you out of the house but it releases feel good chemicals.

Nutrition- The grieving process activates our fight or flight response which uses a lot of energy. You probably won't feel much like eating, but having small nutritious meals can help to restore this energy.

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 about the person/situation, take a deep breath 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

Forgiveness- Grief can activate anger and resentment and although this is part of the process holding on to these emotions can create many problems. Forgiveness is not about condoning the behaviour, nor is it about other person, it is about making a conscious decision to let go of the past and not let these powerful emotions colour your future. Writing a letter that the other person will never read is a great step towards forgiveness. Start by writing down why you are angry, and then move past the anger to the hurt and disappointment. Describe the role that you played in this situation and how you could have done things differently. Then finally write how you have grown, changed and what you have learnt as a result of this event.

Explore new interests/hobbies

As you start to rebuild after the loss you may wish to explore new hobbies or interests. Trying a new activity can bring some fun back into your life and reduces the chances of dwelling on the past.

