



## **Grief How-to-Guide**

### **Facts about grief:**

1. Grief is a normal reaction to the loss of a loved one.
2. Grieving has no set time limit.
3. Everyone grieves differently.
4. Teens tend experience conflicting emotions and rarely have a set pattern of grieving.

There are 5 stages of grief that we all go through: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Everyone goes through these stages in different orders and for different lengths of time. As we respond to the world around us, we go back and forth between these stages within minutes, hours, or days.

### **Denial**

This stage allows us get through each day and carry on with life as usual. After a loss we go into shock or denial, which helps us to slow down the emotions rather than become overwhelmed by the loss. Sometimes in this stage we feel alone, numb, unable to cry, like we can't go on, or that life is meaningless and makes little sense. However, denial allows us to cope and take action to complete tasks associated with the loss, such as planning a funeral.

### **Anger**

Anger is usually the first layer of emotion people feel after a loss. We can be angry at anyone, including ourselves, God, or the deceased. Usually there is pain and other feelings under the anger, like abandonment or powerlessness, but we are most familiar with expressing anger. Being angry can help start the process of releasing emotion around the loss or act as a way to continue a connection to our loved one.

### **Bargaining**

Bargaining is a stage where we replay what we could have, or should have, done differently to save our loved one's life. This usually includes "What if..." and "If only..." statements. Sometimes this involves bargaining with the pain – "please God, if I go to church everyday will you make the pain go away, will you bring back my husband." During this time it is common to feel guilty about the loss, even if you know logically that there was nothing you could do. We want life to go back to the way it was and are searching for anything to make that happen.

### **Depression**

Depression is a healthy response to loss; it would be odd if we didn't get depressed after a loved one passes away. When the loss becomes a reality, we feel deep emptiness that may cause us to withdraw or have intense feelings of sadness and despair, such as feeling like there is no reason to go on. Although depression is common, this does not necessarily mean that crying is the only response. Feeling a lack of interest in previous activities you enjoyed, numbness, excessive fatigue, loss of appetite, and feeling negative about the world around you are also symptoms of depression.

## Acceptance

Acceptance is about recognizing the new normal of life without your loved one. It does not mean we are ok with what happened or that we have moved on, but that this new reality exists. Sometimes we try to keep things the same as a way to keep our loved one alive in spirit; however a time will come when we have to readjust. This usually means filling that person's role with yourself, someone else, or developing new routines around their absence. We might feel like we are betraying our loved one when we do this, but we must make meaningful relationships, listen to how we feel, fulfill our needs, and continue to live life.

### When grief can become "complicated":

Losing a loved one is always difficult, but sometimes other factors associated with the death can make this process more difficult.

1. Losing someone due to homicide or a traumatic accident can include traumatic stress symptoms, such as:
  - a. Nightmares, anxiety, invasive thoughts of the events, fear, guilt, shame, and helplessness.
2. Involvement with the police and courts can create added stress that delays the grieving process, making it more difficult to overcome.
3. Media surrounding death may also add stress and feelings of invasion.
  - a. Leaving no privacy to grieve.
4. Victim blaming, such as number arrests, from media or others can create shame and anger, and hurt the coping process.

Symptoms of complicated grief:

Physical Reactions	continued sleeping problems, nightmares, and intrusive memories
Emotional Reactions	prolonged aggression or hostility, panic attacks, phobias, irrational fears
Behavioral Reactions	isolation, withdrawal from social contact, self-destructive behavior, continued loss of interest

### Recognizing healthy and problematic grieving:

Pay close attention to the posts and behaviors of your participant after they have recently lost someone. Turning to social media to grieve is not a bad thing, but it is important to monitor who may be having a tougher time. Below is a table that outlines a few common behaviors.

<b>Healthy</b>	<b>Problematic</b>
“Rest in Peace” comments on social media	Social media posts describing loneliness or feeling “lost” without the other person
Memorial pages/videos on social media	Posting about revenge on memorial pages/video comments
Feeling sad, angry, and confused	Placing blame for death on other people, and communicating desires to act out revenge
Using social media to connect with others and the deceased. Posting to RIP pages to remember good times, “we miss you”	Using social media to cling to the lost person or continued venting about the loss, such as excessive, daily posts, “can’t live without you”
Comments that the deceased has reached Heaven or peace	Comments that the deceased is not really dead
Asserting that you will overcome the loss	Feeling that you cannot live without the deceased
Remembering the good times with the deceased, especially on holidays, anniversaries, birthdays, and other special occasions	Constantly dwelling in the past and being unable to let go
Talking directly to the deceased through their social media page	Talking directly to the deceased through their social media page every single day
Feelings of anger, sadness, fear, and abandonment	Suicidal or homicidal thoughts

### How to manage grief:

In order to help those experiencing problematic grief to heal, it is important to guide them through the 5 steps at their own pace. Pay close attention to those who have experienced a traumatic loss.

1. Establish meaning and personal significance:
  - a. Use the participant’s religious beliefs to help accept the meaning of loss.
  - b. Try to work through feelings of suddenness and unfairness by communicating that no one is ever really ready for the loss of a close friend/family member.
  - c. Stress that the deceased is loved and no longer in any pain.
  - d. Try and talk the youth out of blaming self, others, or victim for death.
  - e. Correct problematic thinking that “you are only somebody when you die”.
  - f. Confront fears about death.
2. Confront reality and respond to the loss:
  - a. Help organize memorial activities to help make the death real.
  - b. Find a safe space to be alone and cry or express your grief in your own way (no violence!).
  - c. Provide information on how to get in touch with mental health care workers and school social workers.
  - d. Provide emotional support for friends and family when dealing with media, police, funeral arraignments, or other stressors.

- e. Help move youth through denial by allowing them to make new daily routines that no longer involve the deceased.
- 3. Sustain close relationships and support network:
  - a. Prevent the youth from isolation by helping them get together with friends in a supportive way.
  - b. Pay attention to substance use and withdrawing behavior from activities, and try to get the youth re-involved in the community.
  - c. Reframe venting and talks of revenge using anger management and empathy techniques to stop potential incidences of violence.
  - d. Organize community events to bring people together.
- 4. Maintain emotional balance:
  - a. Use self-control training to ensure that your participant is emotionally balanced.
  - b. Remind youth that it is ok to feel many different/opposite emotions at the same time, and help them define them.
  - c. Pay close attention to feelings of guilt, shame, abandonment, and anger.
  - d. Remind youth to respond empathically to others and not to be afraid to express themselves (recommend journaling and other private emotional activities).
- 5. Preserve self-image:
  - a. Throughout the process, remind the youth that they are capable and strong enough to get through their grief.
  - b. Remind youth that grief is a long process with no correct end time.
  - c. Promote resilience by communicating how they have grown through this process and stressing the new coping skills they have learned.