

## How we grieve

Few people go through life without experiencing the death of someone they love. Death is a part of life, it is inevitable and sooner or later we have to face up to that reality. Through the process of grieving we learn how to cope with the future in spite of our loss. How well we manage this affects our quality of life and our ability to relate to others, say experienced counsellors Julia Samuel and Jenni Thomas.

In Victorian times death was part of life and there were rituals of mourning to comfort the bereaved. This is not the case now. With improved health care our expectations are that those we love will live until old age. If they do become ill or have an accident we hope that science and technology will be able to fix it. Because of this death, when it comes, is harder to bear. In a desire not to intrude and as a self-defence mechanism, relatives and friends may ignore the loss and pretend it never happened. Bereaved people are often shunned. They quickly learn that if they hide their feelings people will feel more comfortable with them. Yet it is only by acknowledging and finding ways of expressing painful feelings that you can grieve for the person who has died.

### The tasks of grieving and mourning

People with experience of helping the bereaved, stress that mourning, the emotional process that occurs after a loss, is an essential and necessarily painful healing process, which is achieved through a series of tasks.

### Facing reality

Initially you are likely to be in a state of shock, even when a death has been anticipated. You may feel faint, cry uncontrollably, become hysterical or even collapse. Conversely, you may be so numb that you display no emotion at all and appear very controlled, calm and detached. This initial numbness may last several days and enables you to deal with all the necessary practicalities like coping with the funeral without losing control - a form of emotional protection.

The more traumatic the loss, the more prolonged this numbness is likely to be. In order for you to begin the task of adjustment, it is very important that you gradually accept the death and accept that the person can never return. You may not immediately be able to acknowledge what has happened and may cope by denying it or refusing to talk about it.

Viewing the body of the dead person, getting involved in the preparations for the funeral and observing rituals and traditions will all help you to face the reality of what has happened.

### Experiencing the pain of grief

Once the numbness gradually subsides and the reality of what has happened sinks in, you may have intensely painful feelings lasting for weeks or months. Your grief may overwhelm you so that you are incapable of thinking about anything or anybody else but yourself. You may overreact to other people's comments and appear irritable.

Susan Hill, a writer and a bereaved mother, eloquently described her extreme sensitivity as 'having one skin less'. If only we had the signal nowadays, as in Victorian times, of a black armband to indicate to people shoving and pushing us in the supermarket 'be gentle with me, I am hurting'.

As well as feelings of extreme sadness, you may experience guilt, anger and resentment. Many people struggle with guilt about some aspect of their relationship with the dead person. Perhaps you left your true feelings unsaid or said things you did not really mean.

Maybe you felt you had not spent enough time with them or really listened. You may feel anger towards the dead person for leaving you to cope with life on your own, anger at the medical team for not curing the illness or not keeping the dead person alive and anger at God for letting it happen. You may feel resentment towards a family member who you feel contributed in some way to the death.

Grief is not a mental illness, although sleeplessness, anxiety, fear, anger and a preoccupation with self can all add up to a feeling of 'going mad'. These feelings are natural and, when acknowledged and expressed, will become less frequent and begin, over time, to subside. Expressing grief is cathartic and attempts to short-circuit these feelings rarely help in the long term, and may cause deep-seated problems in the years ahead. If you deny your grief, or your anger or guilt persists to the exclusion of other feelings, you may want to seek help from a trained counsellor.

### **Adjusting to the new reality**

Facing life without someone you love is a difficult and painful process. No one can fill the aching void and each day can bring constant reminders of their absence. Just getting through the day can seem an insurmountable task. The future may seem uncertain or even frightening. It can take many months before you are able to dwell less on the sad events surrounding the death and start to function more as you did before the loss.

### **Reinvesting in the future**

Reinvesting in the future involves letting go of the dead person and moving on in life without them. It can feel like a betrayal and is perhaps the most difficult task of all. Yet moving on is not about forgetting, but finding ways of remembering the person - ways which comfort you without ruling your life.

You begin to put the sadness aside and to look to the future, whilst still recalling happy times spent with the person who has died and taking pleasure in those memories. You start to win back control and life becomes more meaningful. You are not continually trapped by painful feelings, but can choose when you want to reflect on your relationship with the dead person. It is natural at anniversaries for feelings of grief to surface again and to be as vivid as on the day the death occurred. These tasks are not linear, you can move in and out of them at different times, in different circumstances, but they do describe the overall process of a healthy grieving.