

The Process of Grief

It is often not made easy for us to grieve in our society. We can, however, grow and mature as human beings if we are allowed to grieve successfully. Grief is a process not a state. It takes time to work through. Grief is a natural response to a significant loss.

The extremes of grief can differ:

Extreme:

- Death of a close and meaningful relationship – death, divorce, separation, abortion, loss of a limb, suicide

To the loss of:

- Lifestyle
- Job
- Forced retirement
- Loss of youth

However, the response to these losses is similar.

Death is the most significant, maybe because of:

- The finality
- Death confronts one's own mortality or finiteness

Whatever the loss, there is little value in making comparison about the feeling one has.

- There is no consolation in hearing there is someone worse off than you are; hurting more; lost more
- If you are hurting, it does little to hear about how someone else is hurting

Grief will be dependent on a number of factors including:

- Degree of attachment to the person lost.
- Degree to which person enriched your life.
- Quality and length of relationship.
- Nature of death

It will be influenced by many other factors.

Understanding the Process of Grief

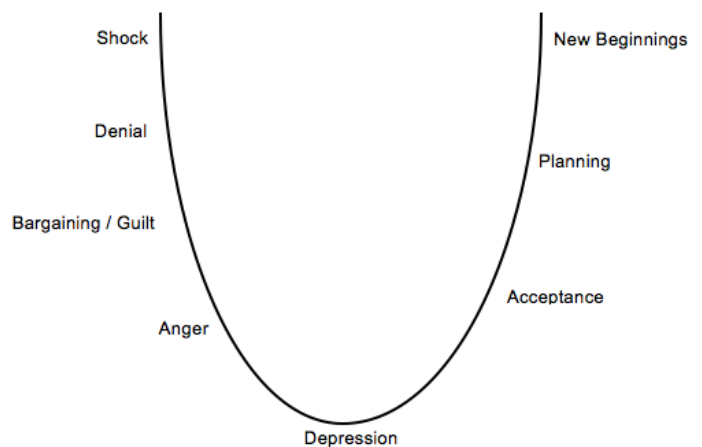
Colin Murray Parkes, in his book "Bereavement", suggests four phases in the grief process.

1. **Numbness:** emotions are frozen
2. **Pining:** desire to bring back the lost
3. **Depression:** preoccupation with the loss
4. **Recovery:** development of a renewed identity

Based upon Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' research on death and dying, the following model for understanding the normal reactions to grief and loss has been developed. Individuals experiencing grief are likely to experience a range of these emotions as they work through the grief process.

"The Grief and Loss Curve"

Common Individual Responses to Grief




Outlined below are some of the normal reactions to grief:

Emotional

Shock:

- Disbelief at what happened
- Feeling numb, as if things are unreal



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Fear:

- of one's own mortality
- for the safety of oneself or one's family
- apparently unrelated fears

Anger:

- at the injustice and senselessness of it all
- generalised anger and irritability
- how this could happen to such a good person

Sadness:

- about the loss both personally and professionally
- flash backs or triggers to previous grief and loss
- about the loss of feeling safe and secure
- feeling depressed or "flat" for no reason

Guilt:

- for having appeared helpless or emotional
- for not behaving as you would have liked
- for unresolved issues or conflict with the person
- for not doing upon reflection what you feel might have made a difference

Physical**Sleep:**

- difficulty getting off to sleep because of intrusive thoughts
- restless and disturbed sleep
- feeling tired and fatigued

Physical problems:

- general agitation and muscle tension
- headaches or general aches and pains
- feeling generally unwell
- other physical signs and symptoms

Thinking**Memories:**

- frequent thoughts or images of the person
- flashbacks or feelings of "reliving" past grief and loss experiences
- attempts to shut-out the painful memories
- real or imagined pictures of what happened "jumping" into your head

Dreams:

- dreams and nightmares about what happened
- unpleasant dreams of other frightening thoughts

Confusion:

- difficulty making simple decisions
- inability to concentrate and memory problems
- not being able to express yourself fluently verbally
- feeling confused generally

Behaviour**Social:**

- withdrawal from others and a need to be alone
- easily irritated by other people
- feelings of detachment from others
- loss of interest in normal activities and hobbies

Work:

- not wanting to go to work, poor motivation
- poor concentration and attention
- sense of lost purpose in your work

Habits:

- increased use of alcohol, cigarettes or other drugs
- loss of appetite or increased eating
- loss of interest in enjoyable activities



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Granger Westberg, in “Good Grief” explains the grief phases in this descriptive way:

1. We are in a state of shock
2. We express emotion
3. We feel depressed and very lonely
4. We may experience physical symptoms of distress
5. We may become panicky
6. We feel a sense of guilt about the loss
7. We are filled with hostility and resentment
8. We are unable to return to usual activities
9. Gradually hope comes through
10. We struggle to readjust to reality

Many people struggle and go forward and regress many times as they “work through” the process.

In talking about phases or stages of grief, it is important to acknowledge the individuality of each grieving person and to be careful not to impose some pattern of grieving on others.

Moving Forward Through the Grief Process

Some of the most important needs of the person experiencing grief can be summarised as follows:

1. To feel **SUPPORT**. We need to recognise that bereavement raises all sorts of feelings, and that to cope people need the care, love, support and understanding of others.
2. To face **REALITY**. The process of recovery is linked directly to acceptance of the loss. Acceptance will not come until reality is faced.
3. To express **FEELINGS** (emotional release). It seems important to many grieving people that emotional release be encouraged. Grieving people should be helped, encouraged, and allowed to express their feelings. This may mean tears, talking, and other acting out.

Too often “would be helpers” suppress rather than encourage and facilitate emotional release. In our society, people often get uncomfortable if you demonstrate your reaction to loss and pain openly.

They may say:

- “Buck-up”
- “It’s time to get over it ...”
- “It’s God’s will.”
- “Brighten-up, you’re upsetting the team.”

Although these comments are well-intentioned, they may prevent you from expressing your feelings. We need to recognise that “being upset” is healthy and helpful rather than harmful.

Negative terms are often used if you get upset:

- Breaking down
- Falling apart
- Cracking-up
- Not coping

Positive terms are often used if you demonstrate restraint:

- Brave
- Strong
- Courageous
- Holding yourself together
- Coping well

Our culture with grief and choice of language around grief and loss may prevent you from expressing your feelings.

4. To move towards the **RE-ESTABLISHMENT** of self (on going living). For many this is difficult and for a period of time, often many months, painful and at times unthinkable. Grieving people need all the care, encouragement and support they can get to enable ongoing living to be increasingly possible.



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Seeking Extra Support and Assistance

Some people benefit from extra help in overcoming the effects of grief and loss. Do not be reticent to get help if you think you need it: it is not a sign of weakness or an indication that you are not in control. Often, the help you receive will be short and simple, and will prevent you from having longer term problems. You may need further assistance if:

- The problems described above are particularly severe, or if they continue for more than five or six weeks.
- You feel numb or empty and do not have appropriate feelings; you may find yourself keeping busy all the time in order to avoid the unpleasant thoughts and feelings.
- You have no friends / family to whom you can talk about the experience and how you feel.
- You are using alcohol or drugs to help you cope.
- If you have any other concerns about the way you or your colleagues are coping and you would like to discuss the matter.

If you feel you would benefit from further support consider accessing the People Assist (EAP) Program or speaking to your doctor (GP).

Summary – Some DO's and DON'TS for Assisting Others through the Grief Process

These are simply some practical suggestions that may be appropriate in many situations.

1. **DO** listen and hear what is being said.
2. **DO** acknowledge that each person's experience of grief and loss will be unique.
3. **DO** remember that nobody has to justify their feelings to you.
4. **DO** realise the person has suffered a loss, even if you don't perceive it as such.
5. **DON'T** prevent the person from expressing their guilt or anger if they need to.

6. **DO** allow the person time to grieve.
7. **DON'T** stifle the person's desire to talk about the deceased.
8. **DO** encourage the griever to express emotion and to work through the grief.
9. **DO** remember that many who give support immediately after a death may be delayed in working through their own grief.
10. **DO** recognise the intensity of grief that will be experienced at certain significant times, eg, anniversaries, Christmas functions.
11. **DON'T** personalise knock-backs to your efforts to assist.
12. **DO** encourage those who have a common grief to support one another if they can.
13. **DON'T** give trite answers to the 'Why?' question.

In Conclusion

Be Aware: Remember that working through grief is a normal and necessary process.

Be There: Learn to be with the person, not to solve the problem.

Be Sensitive: Allow the distress and do not try to take it away.

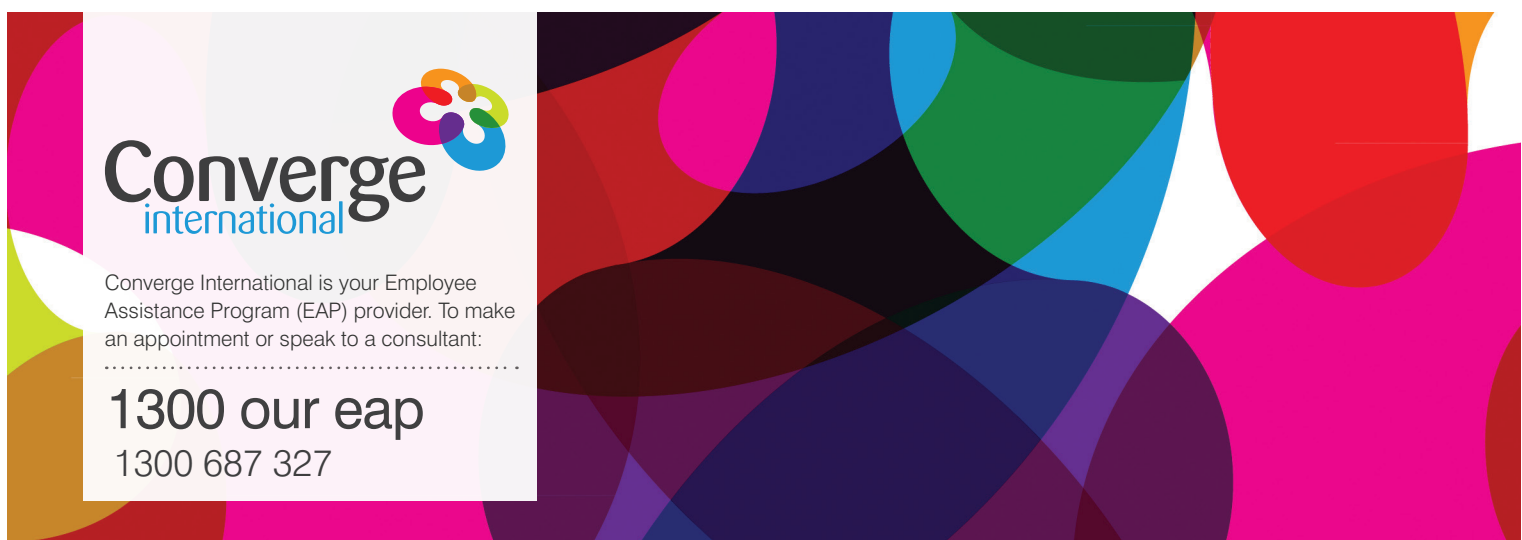
Be Human: Allow expression of feelings (guilt, anger, sorrow, depression) without judgement.

Be Ready: To listen when the story is told over and over again.

Be Patient: Remember that the process of mourning takes time.

Support Services Available to You

If you feel you would benefit from further support consider accessing the EAP or People Assist Program by phoning Converge International on 1300 687 327 or speak to your treating doctor (GP).



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