Understanding the Grief Process

By Marty Tousley

Grief is a normal yet highly personal response to loss. Neither an illness nor a pathological condition, it is a natural process that, depending on how it is managed and understood, can lead to healing and personal growth.

Grief is extremely powerful. It can catch you totally unprepared, knock you off balance and shake you to the core. It can be painful beyond words — physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually — and it can change your life completely. Grief serves to remind you how fragile life is and how vulnerable you are to loss. It can make your present life seem meaningless, and take away your hope for the future.

Understanding the process and knowing what to expect can help you cope. Your pattern of progressing through your grief will be uneven, unpredictable and unique, with no specific time frame. But the more you learn about grief, the better you can cope with it. In the beginning it will seem as if your grief is running you, but in the end, you can learn to run your grief. When you understand what is happening to you and have some idea of what to expect, you will feel more in control of your grief and will be in a better position to take care of yourself, to find your own way through this loss and to begin rebuilding your life.

The worst kind of grief is the grief you're experiencing now. Don't compare your grief with anyone else's, and know that, at this moment, your loss is the worst thing that could happen to anyone. Acknowledge that your loss is worthy of grief, and accept that you must endure the very real feelings of sorrow.

Grief work is very hard and takes enormous energy. Much as you may want to do so, there is no way to avoid this grief of yours. You cannot wait it out; you won't get over it quickly, and nobody can do it for you. It's called grief work because finding your way through grief is hard work, and if you put it off, like a messy chore it will sit there waiting to be done. And the longer it waits, the harder it becomes.

Effective mourning is not done alone. Unfortunately, friends and family members may be finished with your grief long before you are finished with your need to talk about it, and unexpressed feelings can become distorted. It is important that you find an understanding, nonjudgmental listener with whom you can openly acknowledge your feelings and experiences, express and work through your pain, and come to terms with your loss. If friends and family aren't as available as you need them to be, or if your need exceeds their capacity to help, consider attending a support group or seeking help from a bereavement counselor.

How grief is expressed varies among individuals. Everyone grieves differently, according to their age, gender, personality, culture, value system, past experience with loss, and available support. Grieving differs among members of the same family, as each person's relationship with and attachment to the deceased family member varies. How you will react to this death depends on how you've responded to other crises in your life; on what

was lost when this death happened (not only the life of the person who died, but certain aspects of your own life as well: your way of life; who you were in your relationship with that person and who you planned to be; your hopes and dreams for the future); on who died (spouse, parent, child, sibling, grandparent, relative, friend or other; how you lived together and what that person meant to you); on the person's role in your family; on when the death occurred (at what point in the life cycle: yours as well as that of the person who died); and on how (the circumstances surrounding the death, and how the death occurred).

Certain manifestations of grief are typical, common and normal. Although grief is as individual as you are, some feelings and reactions are universal. Their intensity will vary, and they'll happen in no particular order. You may experience all, some or none of them; they may happen only once or many times, sometimes several years after your loved one's death. Respect your own feelings and reactions. Take time to look, listen, experience and understand them. They are nature's way of getting your attention.

Grief is a lifelong process. While the agonizing pain of loss diminishes in intensity over time, it's never gone completely. It is absolutely normal to feel the aftershock of loss for the rest of your life. Grieving is not a reaction to a single event, like an illness that can be cured and from which you will recover. It's more like a deep wound that eventually heals and closes, but whose terrible scar remains and still can hurt at times.

Death may have ended your loved one's life, but it did not end your relationship. The bond you have will continue and endure throughout your lifetime, depending on how you take your memories and your past with you into the future. Many grievers report maintaining an active connection with their deceased loved ones by talking to them, dreaming about them, sensing their presence or feeling watched over and protected by them. It is normal and healthy to foster these continuing bonds, as you decide how your loved one will be remembered, memorialized and included in your family and community life.

Time does not heal grief. Time is neutral. It is not the passage of time alone that heals. It is what you do with time that matters. Now that this death has happened to you, you must decide what you can do with your grief. Grieving is an active process, not a passive one, and recovery is a choice. Coping with grief involves many courses of action, and as you find your way through this first year of grief, you will learn how to use this grieving time to help you heal yourself.

There is no right or wrong way to do the work of grieving. There is only your way, and you must discover it for yourself. There is no magic formula, no short cut, and no easy way out. Grief is like a long, winding tunnel whose entrance is closed behind you, and the only way out is through.

Source: Marty Tousley, "Grief: Understanding the Process," AfterTalk.
https://blog.aftertalk.com/grief-understanding-process/