

Coping with Grief



CARRIER SEKANI
FAMILY SERVICES

Creating wellness together.



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What is Grief?

"Grief is a natural response when we are faced with the loss of someone or something that is important to us."

Grief is the term for the emotional reaction to a loss. While grief is most often associated with the death of a loved one, the term can be associated with any type of loss. Grief can be experienced after the loss of a relationship, a job, feelings of safety, or even one's health. The intensity can vary greatly with different types of loss, but generally, the symptoms and the road to recovery are similar. Grief is a natural response when we are faced with the loss of someone or something that is important to us.

While it has long been accepted that people go through "stages of grief" in response to a loss, the stages are not the rule book for loss. This was originally identified by Dr. Kubler-Ross in her studies of the reactions people went through when they were terminally ill (Kubler-Ross, 1969). The stages of grief are simply a guide to help us understand the emotions we are going through. People who are grieving do not necessarily go through all of the stages, nor do they go through them in order. Sometimes people jump back into stages.

A person with long brown hair, wearing a green hooded sweatshirt and blue pants, is sitting on a dark wooden dock. They are facing away from the camera, looking out over a calm body of water. The sky is a mix of blue and grey, with soft light reflecting on the water's surface, suggesting dusk or dawn. The dock is made of dark wooden planks that lead towards the water.

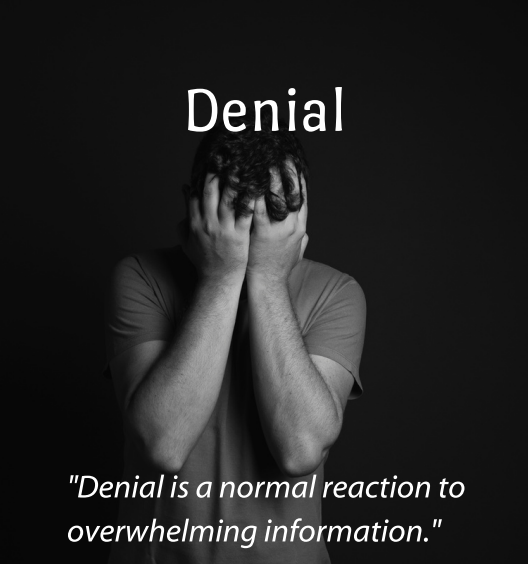
Shock

"Shock is a normal reaction to loss, especially when the loss is unexpected."

This is a normal reaction to loss, especially when the loss was unexpected as with a sudden death or unexpected breakup. This emotion is often described as feeling numb. The thinking and doing part of our being is often at a standstill until the initial shock has passed.

Often if people are expecting a loss as with a long-standing terminal illness, this stage of grief is absent. "Anticipatory grief" means that someone is expecting the loss and the shock stage of grief (at time of diagnosis) happened before the loss itself. Sometimes people feel guilt when they feel a sense of relief when there is finally an end to the inevitable loss.


Denial



"Denial is a normal reaction to overwhelming information."

Once we are able to start thinking again after our initial shock, we will often search for ways to deny what we are being told or what is happening. When being informed about a loved one's sudden death, the automatic response may be that there must be a mistake. Someone getting a diagnosis of a major health issue may ask for a second opinion. Denial is our normal reaction to overwhelming information.


Anger



"Anger is a common reaction."

After we have exhausted our ways to deny what has happened, anger is a common reaction. This may be anger toward a person you feel might be responsible for the loss. This may be the driver of a car in a vehicle accident, the doctor who gave you a life-threatening diagnosis, or the creator for letting the loss occur.

Bargaining



Sometimes people try to bargain with themselves, the creator, or a medical professional to try to change the outcome of the situation.


Acceptance

This stage is often thought of as the last stage in grief although people can visit this stage many times in grief by accepting small parts of the loss. Some days they may be more accepting than other days.

Often people feel they can't "accept" a loss because they feel to accept means they are "OK" with the loss, or that they will forget a loved one. This is not true. Acceptance means that you acknowledge the loss, you acknowledge what the loss means for you, and you find ways to live with the loss.

Even people who experience the most painful of losses, such as the loss of a child, can move to acceptance and find some comfort in their child's memory and some way to move on in life. This does not mean that they will ever be "OK" with the death of a child and they will never forget that child. They "accept" that the child is lost and there is nothing they can do to change that.

*"Acceptance means that you acknowledge the loss,
and you find ways to live with the loss."*



"Like the stages of grief, people can move in and out of symptoms as they process their grief."

Symptoms of Grief

Grief has both emotional and physical symptoms. Depending on the nature of the loss, symptoms will vary in intensity and will have various time frames. Like the stages of grief, people can move in and out of symptoms as they process their grief. Common symptoms include:

- Crying
- Screaming
- Rocking
- Pacing
- Zoning out (1000-yard stare)
- Not caring for self (washing, dressing, eating).
- Withdrawing from others and activities
- Sleeplessness or over sleeping

Grief can also cause physically painful symptoms including:

- Stomach pain
- Headaches
- Body aches



*"Grief is a process. Be gentle
with yourself and others."*

Taking Care of Yourself and Others During Grief

Grief is a process - remember there is no set way or timeline to move through it. Be gentle with yourself or others. Allow time and reflection for grieving. Try to reach out to others and share the thoughts of your grief.

Symptoms of grief can look like depression. If depression-like symptoms are present, watch for additional symptoms such as hopelessness for the future and indicators that you or a loved one has lost the will to live. In cases like these, a suicide risk assessment should be explored.

A close-up photograph showing the back of a person wearing a grey t-shirt. Two hands are gently resting on their shoulders, one on each side, suggesting a comforting or supportive gesture. The background is a neutral, dark grey.

"Children cannot usually express their feelings in reaction to a loss."

Grief in Children and Teens

Young children cannot usually articulate what they are feeling in reaction to a loss. Children will usually present with physical ailments, such as stomachache, after a significant loss. Children look to adults to protect them and take care of them. When a primary adult dies, or is removed from their life, feelings of insecurity join the usual emotions of the grief cycle.

In addition, children are “egocentric” in that they do not yet have the capacity to see beyond self as being central to their world. Therefore, they may see themselves as somehow responsible when someone important dies. Likewise, if a child/parent is removed from a home (birth or foster) the child may see this as being their “fault”, even when the removal was due to a caregiver’s abuse or neglect.

Teenagers are typically at a stage of life where they look to their peers for validation and support. Therefore, when faced with a loss, teens may pull away from primary caregivers and spend more time with their peers as a way to avoid or cope with their grief. It is not uncommon for the teenager to refuse to discuss their feelings with an adult. It is important to remember though that they will still hear you. Keep the lines of communication open by letting the teenager know you are there to listen when they want to talk.

It is vital with both children and teenagers to maintain an environment of safety and support to help them through their grief.



Disenfranchised Grief

From the notion of ideal circumstances, the grieving process evolves naturally. The grieving person practices within cultural and ritual beliefs and receives societal and community support.

Disenfranchised grief (DF) is just the opposite phenomenon in which others, including family and society, do not acknowledge the suffering. Thus, it is a hidden sorrow and the pain from the loss resides in a person's life for a long time and ultimately, the pain propagates in the griever's life when it is not socially accepted. In disenfranchised grief, the grieved person or sometimes the entire family cannot publicly mourn.

The suffered person does not receive the usual support that other people received in their grieving process. Thus, disenfranchising is actively harmful and destructive as it involves denial of entitlement and imposing a sanction. Therefore, disenfranchised grief exists when a loss is neither publicly supported nor acknowledged and remains invalidated. The disenfranchising behaviour, particularly from suicide or overdose, interferes with society's stigma or the community, and personal or family life.

A typical example of DF's compliments: the relationship before the loss or the loss itself is stigmatized, such as the death of an ex-spouse, death from suicide or drug overdose.

REACH OUT TO SEEK HELP

KUU-US INDIGENOUS CRISIS LINES:

Youth/Kids:

1-250-723-2040

Adults/Elders:

1-250-723-4050

Toll Free:

1-800-588-8717

SUICIDE PREVENTION:

1-800-SUICIDE

OR:

1-800-784-2433

Northern BC Crisis Lines

24/7 Crisis Line:

1-888-562-1214

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS LINES:

310-6789

No Area Code - simply call that number

Texting Crisis Lines

Youth/Adult:

text HOME to 686868

Kids Help Phone

1-800-668-6868

There are non-crisis Carrier Sekani Family Services mental health and addiction recovery supports available for children, adults, and families in our member communities and in the urban communities of Prince George, Vanderhoof, Fort Saint James, Fraser Lake, and Burns Lake. Please check with your health centre or call the Health and Wellness Program at 250-567-2900 for more information.



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