

BEREAVEMENT & LOSS

Introduction

Different culture groups have different ways of marking the death of someone they love. Some mourn in a way which celebrates the life of the deceased; others make a great and visible show of their grief. Traditionally, we in Britain are generally very low key in our response to death, marking it with a funeral and perhaps a gathering afterwards, but with no recognised period of mourning and often no great show of feeling. This can leave people feeling very alone in dealing with the intense personal emotions they may be experiencing.

Your Own Grief

The death of someone who is significant to you is one of the hardest things you will experience in your life. Whether it is expected or a shock, the enormity of loss is something that impacts on you in a very profound way. Grief takes a long time to work through. There are no hard and fast guidelines for this. It takes as long as it takes, but as a general rule it will take longer than you expect. It is important not to try to 'get over it' too quickly, not to adopt a 'stiff upper lip' attitude. Grief is an inevitable and human response. If suppressed, it may well surface at some later, less appropriate stage. Sometimes there seems to be an expectation that you will have recovered after a certain time has elapsed, but everyone has their own recovery time which cannot be hurried. The first anniversary of the death is an important milestone and can be particularly difficult. Subsequent birthdays and anniversaries can be poignant reminders of your loss, and you may need to find your own way of dealing with such times by either marking them as special commemorative events or by ensuring you distract yourself while time passes.

Bereavement is an entirely individual experience. No one can tell you how you will or should feel. Everyone grieves in their own special way but there are some generally accepted and recognised reactions:

- You may at first feel totally numb, as if paralysed
- You may find yourself unable to believe the person really is dead
- You may find yourself very angry at being deserted
- You may feel an enormous sense of unfairness
- You may find yourself crying uncontrollably and unable to function as normal
- You may feel guilty about surviving, about not having said goodbye; about leaving things unresolved
- You may feel an aching void, as if you have lost a limb, which you feel will never be filled again
- You may be traumatised if the death has been in any way violent such as through an accident, suicide or murder.

The Reaction of Others

You will be aware that people around you will react in very different ways to your grief. There will be those who very much want to help in practical ways, or by giving you emotional support. It is up to you to guide them as to how they may best help you; whether you need a listening ear, or maybe need to be left alone for a while. Remember, they can't know what will help unless you tell them. Don't be afraid to take up offers of help; it is not a sign of weakness to lean on someone when you need support. There will be others who are unable to cope with your grief, who may not be able to talk about the death or even acknowledge it. This is usually because it either raises profoundly difficult feelings in them, or because they simply don't know what to do or say. This can seem very hurtful if you don't understand what may be behind this seemingly unfeeling behaviour, but it is not uncommon.

How Can You Help Yourself?

Here are some suggestions which you may find helpful. Recognise that mourning takes its time and you cannot hurry it along. Allow yourself to cry, scream or shout and forgive yourself for doing so at 'inappropriate' moments if that is what you need to do. Don't feel guilty about doing so, even if you feel others are critical of you. Accept whatever help you are offered from friends, relatives, religious ministers etc. Recognise your need to talk about the deceased, even if you need to do so over and over again, and allow yourself to do so until the need lessens. If you are worried about over-using friends, talk to a Counsellor or other professional helper. If and when you feel ready, consider reading some of the literature on death and loss. Some books are suggested below. You may find this useful and comforting. Think about concrete ways of doing something to ease your pain. Would it help to write a letter to the deceased saying what you perhaps didn't manage to say in their lifetime? Would you like to plant a tree or shrub in their memory and watch it blossom? Could you light a candle in remembrance on special days? Do whatever you need to do, recognising that this is a most testing and difficult times in your life.

And Afterwards.....

The pain gradually lessens. It does happen even though you think it never will. But with that might come guilt and worry about forgetting or letting go of the dead person. At this stage it may become quite hard to let go of the grief because that is what links you to the deceased. It is important to allow yourself to let go. Along the years, although the pain lessens, the memories will never leave you as the death finds its place in your history and experience. The more easily you can accept the need to grieve, the more comfortably it will rest.

Books

The Courage to Grieve - Judy Tatelbaum

A very understanding book about many aspects of grief and mourning

Facing Grief: Bereavement and the Young Adult - Susan Wallbank

Specifically written for age 18-28 and dealing with specific losses eg. Grandparent, sibling, partner, baby, friend.

A Special Scar: The Experience of People Bereaved by Suicide - Alison Wertheimer

Well constructed, helpful and compassionate.

All these books are recommended by CRUSE.

Finally a previous page, treating the subject slightly differently is also available.

Further Help

www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk,

CRUSE Youth Involvement Project (for young people between 12 and 18) Helpline 0808 808 1677

(open Mondays and Wednesdays between 4.00 and 7.00 p.m.)

www.rd4u.org.uk (website for young people)

The Counselling Service

The Chaplains

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

Cruse Bereavement (020 8332 7227)

London Association of Bereavement Services Tel: 020 89404818

Royal College of Psychiatrists Bereavement Pages

SOBS (Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide)
