Grieving the Loss of a Loved One

Self-Help Series
Norfolk State University Counseling Center 823-8173
116A Bowser Building

Someone to whom you have given love and from whom you have received love has died. You are in mourning. You are bereft. To be “bereaved” literally means “to be torn apart” and “to have special needs.” I am truly sorry for your loss.

Perhaps your most important “special need” right now is to be compassionate with yourself. Over my years of walking with people in grief, I have learned that many of us are hard on ourselves when we are in mourning. We often have inappropriate expectations of how “well” we should be doing with our grief (Wolfelt, 2001).

These expectations result from common societal messages that tell us to be strong in the face of grief. We are told to “carry on,” to “keep our chins up,” and to “keep busy.” In actuality, when we are in grief, we need to slow down, to turn inward, to embrace our feelings of loss and to seek and accept support.

Good self-care is essential during a time of mourning. It does not mean that you are feeling sorry for yourself; rather, it means you are allowing yourself to heal. For it is in nurturing ourselves, in allowing ourselves the time and loving attention we need to journey through our grief, that we find meaning in our continued living (Wolfelt, 2001).

The following is a list of things to consider as you go through the journey of mourning:

1. Understanding the difference between grief and mourning.

Grief is the constellation of internal thoughts and feelings we have when someone loved dies.

Mourning is the outward expression of grief.

Everyone who has the capacity to give and receive love grieves when someone loved dies, but if we are to heal, we must also mourn.

2. Be compassionate with yourself.

The journey through grief is a long and difficult one. It is also a journey for which there is no preparation.
Don’t judge yourself or try to set a particular course for healing. Each person’s grieving process is unique. Each of us has unique needs during this process.

3. Acknowledge the reality of the death.

You must gently confront the difficult reality that someone you loved is dead and will never physically be present to you again.

Whether the death was sudden or anticipated, acknowledging the full reality of the loss may occur over weeks and months.

You will first acknowledge the reality of the loss with your head. Only over time will you come to acknowledge it with your heart.

At times, you may push away the reality of the death. This is normal.

4. Embrace the pain of the loss.

It is easier to avoid, repress, or push away the pain of grief than it is to confront it.

You will probably need to “dose” yourself in embracing your pain. If you were to allow all the pain at once, you could not survive.

5. Expect to have a multitude of feelings.

When in grief, we don’t just feel sad. We may feel numb, angry, guilty, afraid, or confused. Sometimes these feelings follow each other within a short period of time or they may occur simultaneously.

6. Know that grief does not proceed in orderly predictable stages or in a certain time.

Be compassionate with yourself as you go through your own unique grief journey.

7. Remember the person who died.

When someone loved dies, that person lives on in us through memory.

To heal, you need to actively remember the person who died and commemorate the life that was lived.

Never let anyone take your memories away in a misguided attempt to save you from pain. It is good for you to continue to display photos of the person who died.

Part of your self-identity was formed by the relationship you had with the person who passed away. You will need to re-anchor yourself and reconstruct your self-identity slowly.

9. Receive ongoing support from others.

As mourners, we need the love and understanding of others if we are to heal.

Don’t feel ashamed by your dependence on others right now. Grief is a process, not an event, and you will need the continued support of your friends and family for weeks, months and years. You may also wish to seek support from a counselor.

10. Allow for numbness.

Feelings of shock, numbness and disbelief are nature’s way of temporarily protecting us from the full reality of the death of someone loved.

We often think, “I will wake up and this will not have happened.” Mourning can feel like being in a dream.

11. Plan or participate in a meaningful ceremony for the person who died.

Rituals are symbolic activities that help us, together with our families and friends, express our deepest thoughts and feelings about life’s most important events.

12. Be aware that your grief affects your body, heart, social self and spirit.

Grief is physically demanding. The body responds to the stress of the encounter and the immune system can weaken, making you more susceptible to illness.

The emotional toll of grief is complex and painful. We often feel many different feelings, and those feelings can shift and blur over time.

13. Allow yourself to cry.

Crying is a cleansing and healing form of mourning.

14. Reach out and touch.

For many people, physical contact with another person is healing.

15. Express your faith.
If you have faith or spirituality, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you.

This may come in the form of praying. Studies have shown that praying helps people heal.

16. Simplify your life.

During grief, we are often overwhelmed by all the tasks and commitments we have. During this time it can be helpful to keep your life simple.

17. Allow yourself to say no.

Especially soon after the death, you may lack the energy as well as the desire to participate in activities you use to find pleasurable.

18. Be mindful of anniversaries and holidays.

Anniversaries—of the death, life events, birthdays, and holidays—can be especially hard when you are in grief. Reach out to others on these difficult days.

19. Reassess your priorities.

What gives your life meaning? What doesn’t? Take steps to spend more time on the things that give your life meaning.

20. Allow for feelings of unfinished business.

Death often brings about feelings of unfinished business. The sudden loss of a loved one can be very different than the anticipated loss of a loved one. After a sudden death we may be left with feelings of things we never did, things we didn’t get to say, things we wish we hadn’t said or done. Allow yourself to think and feel through these “if onlys”. You may never be able to fully resolve these issues, but if you permit yourself to mourn them, you will become reconciled to them.

21. Write a letter to your loved one.

Is there something you wanted to say to the person who died, but never did? Write him or her a letter and openly express thoughts and feelings.

22. Establish a memorial fund in the name of the person who died.
What was meaningful to the person who died? Did he or she support a certain non-profit organization or participate in a certain recreational activity?

23. Count your blessings.

You may not feel very good about your life right now. That’s O.K. Still, you are blessed. Your life has purpose and meaning. It will just take you some time to think and feel this through for yourself.

This handout was adapted from the Book *Healing Your Grieving Heart* by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D. The following is a list of readings that may help you in your journey through grieving.
