

Help for the Grieving – Part 1 of 2

The loss of a loved one places a person on a journey they never wanted to take. It not only causes a person to experience a wide variety of emotions, it also takes an incredible amount of energy to travel that journey. Loss affects all of us in some way – some are affected directly, while others are affected peripherally. This two-part article is targeted toward the latter – the support person.

Co-workers, friends, and family can play an important role in supporting those who are grieving. Understanding loss and grief will help you become a better support person to those who are grieving.

The research work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross serves as the foundation for understanding the grief process. She identifies five stages as 1) shock and denial, 2) anger, 3) depression and detachment, 4) dialogue and bargaining, and 5) acceptance. There is no “right” or “wrong” way for a person to pass through these stages. Every person is unique. The order of the stages can be very random, sometimes a person may spend a very long period of time in one stage while they pass through another seemingly without notice.

As a support person to someone who is grieving, you first need to let them experience their grief in their own way with their own timing. Even the same person will grieve differently for each loss they experience. By the age of 38, I had lost my father to heart disease and my only child (at that time) in a horse-back riding accident. These two journeys of grief were vastly different, yet cast some shadows of similarity. The needs I had from my support system were vastly different as well.

There are two major psychological responses to grief used by people suffering loss. 1) using coping mechanisms and, 2) emotional reactions.

Coping Mechanisms: This psychological response protects, or “insulates”, the individual and reduces the level of anxiety they may feel in any given moment. This provides them with time to adjust to the loss and begin the grieving and healing process. Coping mechanisms have characteristics of their own:

- 1) Disbelief or denial: This type of response allows the person time to adjust by reducing anxiety and limiting their awareness of what is going on around them. Emotionally processing the past slows down so that the pain can be let in more slowly. Inside, the person's mind may be shouting “NO, this can't have happened” in the midst of experiencing a sort of “emotional anesthesia.” The individual is numb, confused, and perhaps indifferent to what is going on around

them. The outward expressions support persons may see can be fairly extreme – sighing and crying to mute and withdrawn. Persons in the circle of support can help the most with this part of grieving by listening nonjudgmentally and allowing the person suffering a loss to express their full range of emotions. It is important not to give advice, but rather to focus on being a supportive listener.

- 2) Disorganization and dependence: This part of the process is characterized by confusion where the person feels out of touch with the ordinary routines of their life. They may need their support circle to pick up more daily living or work tasks than they normally would. Tasks such as taking out the trash can seem overwhelming. In the work place, they may struggle to return the most basic phone calls or even attend staff meetings. They may become demanding and seem selfish in their requests. Generally, it is wise not to make major decisions, such as moving, changing jobs, or selling property during this time.
- 3) Rationalization: This is a coping mechanism where the grieving individual seeks answers. They feel a strong need to understand what happened to cause the death. They may seek out the most intricate details of the medical services provided at the time of the accident, or the technical medical information related to the fatal disease that claimed their loved one. Again, those in the circle of support can help the most by simply being there – being a good listener and providing their physical and emotional presence to the grieving.

Emotional Reactions: These reactions allow those grieving to express their emotions and feelings associated with the loss.

- 1) Anger and resentment: These are common emotions for grieving individuals. They are often frustrated with what has happened and expressing anger and resentment is a reflection of that frustration. Support persons, especially those closest to the grieving, need to be aware that this anger and resentment may be projected toward them (a spouse, partner, sibling, doctor, etc.) Overt expressions of their emotions should be expected. Talking openly about their feelings is a helpful way to reduce their anger. Listening to calming music or engaging in physical activity are two other ways the grieving can “let go” of their anger and resentment in a positive way.
- 2) Guilt: This is a frequent response to loss. If they express guilt, it is better for them to talk about it rather than be encouraged to divert it. Telling a grieving person that it is not their fault doesn’t really help, either. A support person should encourage full expression of feelings.

- 3) Fear and anxiety: This is another common component in the grieving process. They may express hopelessness, helplessness, hurt, and anxiety. Their life has significantly changed and leads to anxiety about the unknown future.

Grieving is not an easy process, but neither is being in the support role. Those who are in their circle of support can better equip themselves to help if they know what to expect. Next week, look for some specific suggestions on how to be a better support person. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!