

The Grieving Process

Since there's very little grief training in our culture, people are often surprised by how hard their grief hits them. We usually don't know what to expect until we experience a major loss and begin to suffer the consequences.

It's important to understand that grief is a pervasive experience that impacts the whole person--physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. It's also important not to be afraid to experience grief symptoms--many people try to put their grief aside and "get over it," but this only delays the healing process. As you go through the grieving process, you'll probably experience three distinct phases of grief.

Shock and Denial

Most people experience this as their initial reaction--shock, a feeling of numbness or unreality, and possibly even denial that the loved one is gone. In this initial phase, our minds begin to adjust to the loss of our loved one.

Because this is such a difficult time, thinking about or experiencing grief constantly is too painful, so we go back and forth between believing the loss has happened and a sense of denial or unreality. It's critical to give yourself time to adjust to the loss and to come to terms with it. This stage can last as long as several weeks.

Disorganization

This is a time of chaos for individuals experiencing grief at the loss of a loved one as they try to adjust to the world without the person in it. During this phase, we are intensely aware of the reality of our loss, but will try almost anything to escape it.

This is a period of exhaustion and intense emotion, and the grieving person will often experience mood swings, sometimes dramatic ones. Normal emotions at this stage include anger, extreme sadness, depression, despair, and extreme jealousy of others who haven't suffered the same loss.

During this stage, people begin to understand all the implications of the loss and begin to rebuild their life. This stage can last a year or more.

Recovery

This stage is also known as acceptance or reorganization. The disrupted stage people go through comes to an end as they find a new balance. People in mourning become aware that the physical signs of their grief are beginning to fade and that they are less exhausted than they once were.

The pain of the loss remains, but the unbearable intensity of it recedes, and people begin to experience hope again. Life begins to seem possible again.