

Understanding Grief and the Grieving Process

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Grief is a part of life. It's a profound and painful natural reaction to the loss of someone or something deeply meaningful and loved. Though much has been written about how we process the significant losses in our lives, grief remains a taboo subject largely misunderstood, unexplored, and ignored in our society. Let's look at how to move through our own grief, how we can support those we love as they grieve, and the healing power of gratitude.

Loss is a part of life, plain and simple. And by its simplest definition, grief is the process that we are thrown into when we experience a significant loss in our lives. Most of us associate the term with the loss of someone we love, but we can also experience grief through other significant losses, like the loss of a job, the loss of a beloved pet, the loss of a significant relationship, a life-changing accident, or diagnosis (your own or of a loved one), and significant, definitive life-changing transitions, like the end of active parenting, when children leave the family home, retirement or the end of a career. The grieving is different for each of these, but it is still processing a loss and significant change in one's life.

Often, in the aftermath of a life-changing loss, people experiencing grief find those around them uncomfortable, and don't know what to say or how to act. Some go so far as to politely avoid them, while many well-meaning people offer platitudes or advice that adds to feelings of isolation and shuts down the possibility of any meaningful and supportive interactions.

Five phases; no roadmap or timeline

In the 1960's, psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross introduced the five stages of loss in her ground-breaking book, *On Death and Dying*. They are (in the customary order): denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

As widely known as the five phases of grief may be, they remain deeply misunderstood and misconstrued. What the phases are not is a list or a prescribed step-by-step process, but elements of the grieving process. Each person experiences and moves through grief in their unique way, and in their own time. In other

words, there is no correct order or limit to the number of times a person may cycle through one or more of these stages as they grieve. We jump around in different phases. Likewise, there is no ideal or *normal* timeline when it comes to the grieving process. That is as unique as each individual is.

The more significant the loss

The more significant the loss we are processing, the more complex, challenging, and prolonged it can be. We need time to move through loss. In *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross says: "We're expected to go back to work immediately, keep moving, to get on with our lives. But it doesn't work that way. We need time to move through the pain of loss. We need to step into it, really to get to know it..."

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— Elisabeth Kübler - Ross

Getting to know grief

When we experience grief, we need to do just that — feel it, pay attention to our feelings, acknowledge the hard days, and show compassion for ourselves when we are overwhelmed. At times we may feel unable to

cope, and need to withdraw from the world. We may experience physical symptoms like fatigue, loss of appetite, gastrointestinal disorders, or insomnia. Our immune systems can become compromised, leaving us susceptible to colds, flu, and infections. We may experience a whole range of feelings, numbness and at times feel as though we are riding an emotional roller coaster. We may struggle with depression and anxiety.

A healthy way through and forward

Every experience of grief is unique, and every person deals with and expresses grief in their own way and time. As we move through the grieving process, it is important to stay connected with our feelings and acknowledge our pain and struggles. When we grieve, we need to stay connected to our friends and family, and surround ourselves with and reach out to people who care about us, and allow them to offer support when we need it.

Complicated grief

Over time, most people learn to live with their loss and begin to reengage with the world, and find a way forward in their own life. But sometimes, even after a significant period of time, some people remain trapped in an intense state of mourning, unable to focus on anything other than their loss. This is known as complicated grief. There are specific interventions for people struggling with complicated grief.

The healing power of gratitude

Beyond the support of loved ones and professional interventions, gratitude is one of the most powerful healing tools available for those dealing with loss. Theodor Seuss Geisel — more widely known as Dr. Seuss — said, “Don’t cry because it’s over, smile because it happened.” His often quoted words speak to the healing power of gratitude. To grieve, after all, is to mourn someone we love, someone who has enriched our lives, brought us great joy, and shared the ups and downs of life with us.

**“Don’t cry because it’s over,
smile because it happened.”**

— Theodor Seuss Geisel (Dr. Seuss)

Gratitude works in many ways. It brings us into the here and now, where we can feel both sadness and joy as we reflect on good memories. We begin to see our grief as part of a cherished bond with another person. We can begin to appreciate the many ways in which someone we love enhanced and informed our lives. We begin to understand that loss is a part of life and that the depth of our grief is a measure of the quality and depth of our connection to our loss. Though the pain of loss may never disappear, we can move forward with our precious memories and appreciation for the many blessings we have known. It is important to focus on the time we were blessed with the person and all the memories we built together, then to focus on the loss and lack. The love you shared is always present, even if the physical body is not around to create new experiences with you.

When Someone We Love is Grieving

Supporting a close friend or family member who is grieving can be extremely challenging and upsetting for many of us. Many of us fear that we will say or do the wrong thing. As a result, we may avoid people when they need us most, or attempt to ‘fix’ their feelings when we’re in their presence. Here are a few dos and don’ts to remember when supporting someone we love who is grieving.

- **Don’t** avoid talking with someone who is grieving: Even though you may not know what to say, show up for them. Listen to them if they want to talk, and let them know that you are there if they need you.
- **Don’t** exclude them from plans when they would normally be included. If they feel unable to attend, they will let you know.
- **Don’t** try to ‘fix’ their feelings with platitudes. Remember, every person experiences grief in their own way and in their own time.
- **Do** make yourself available and offer your company and support.
- **Do** allow them to take a break from talking about their loss. Your company on a walk in nature or lunch or dinner, chatting about mundane subjects could be just what they need. Take your cues from them.


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About the author

Dr. Monica Vermani is a Clinical Psychologist specializing in treating trauma, stress and mood & anxiety disorders, and the founder of Start Living Corporate Wellness. She is a well-known speaker and author on mental health and wellness. Her upcoming book, A Deeper Wellness, is scheduled for publication in 2021.

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Dr. Vermani has recently launched an exciting online self-help program, A Deeper Wellness, delivering powerful mental-health guidance, life skills, and knowledge that employees can access anywhere, anytime. <https://www.adeeperwellness.com/>

