

COPING WITH LOSS: UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

There are four steps to recovery from a major loss. You can expect to take these steps over a span of time that varies from a few months to three years or more. Some of them will seem automatic, out of your control. Others will require enormous willpower.

Examples of Loss: Death of a loved one, Divorce, Major move, Job loss. The steps are:

SHOCK AND NUMBNESS

In the first seven to ten days after a major loss, you will probably feel stunned, shocked and overwhelmed. You may feel "frozen" or hysterical. In any case, you will have a difficult time later remembering much of what took place. It is a poor time to make any decisions that will have a lasting impact on your life.

Shock can last from a few hours to several days, depending upon the severity of your loss. The important things for you to know are that:

It is a necessary first step to recovery

It won't last long

It's not a time for long-term decision making

It's good to have a trusted friend with you

When the shock leaves the pain comes

DENIAL AND WITHDRAWAL

When the shock wears off, you may not be ready to face the reality of your loss. You will want to deny the thing that has happened with all your strength. Some of the feelings you may experience are:

Confusion/difficulty concentrating

Feeling weak and drained of energy

Lack of appetite

Lack of sleep or oversleeping

A frequent dry mouth

Physical aches and pains

Lack of concern with personal hygiene or grooming

Fantasies of what you "should" have done (guilt)

Expecting a mistake was made and job restored

Disillusionment with your new situation

Anxiety

Anger

Inability to perform routine tasks

Relief

All of these are normal reactions to loss. It's quite possible you will think you are over some reaction and weeks or even months later it may return. You can say to yourself, "This reaction is normal. This is another step on the way through grief. I will not always feel like this."

Sometimes, even those closest to you won't understand your loss any better than you do. Family members want you to get back on balance much more quickly than you're going to be able to do. They won't know what to say to you. Some will avoid you.

At the same time you may find yourself too fatigued to reach out for help--even to make a telephone call. You will want people to reach for you.. You will want to go over the loss with those closest to you again and again. Others will want you to stop talking about it. If you know these conflicts are normal, you can be more patient with yourself and with others.

It is important to recognize the signs of denial and withdrawal and understand them as part of your loss. It's a difficult step of recovery because you are least able to reach out when you most need to.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND PAIN

Acknowledging your loss is the most important step of your recovery. It is at this point that you will again take full charge of your life and full responsibility for your feelings.

As you acknowledge your own loss, it will help if you remember that others can't experience the pain you are feeling. They don't know how difficult it is for you to face the reality of whatever has happened to you.

There is nothing easy about saying "This part of my life is over." It hurts! But it won't hurt forever. Emotional pain is another of the signs of progress towards a full life once more. It is important at this point of your recovery to remind yourself often that you will not always feel as you do at the moment.

ADAPTING AND RENEWAL

The first sign that the roughest part of your grief is over is a change in the questions you are asking. From the time of your loss the most haunting and persistent question is, "Why did this happen to me?" The day will come, often a year or more after the loss, when a new question will emerge. That question is: "How can I grow through this tragic event to become a better person?"

When you stop asking "Why?" and begin asking "How?" you are beginning to adapt to your new life without the person, place or condition that has been lost.

As time goes on you will realize that your recovery is a lifelong process of adapting to other changes and losses. As it is with any skill, you will get better and better as you continue using the new resources you have learned from this loss.

You won't forget your loss. It will always be a part of your life history. But, you will be able to think about the person, the place or whatever was lost to you without pain.

The day will come when you will know deep inside that you have recovered your balance, completed your journey through loss and are ready to get on with a good and full life. On that day, you will be a stronger person than you have ever been before.

Throughout the grieving process don't forget to talk about your feelings of loss with friends, family, clergy, and/or a counselor.

RECOMMENDED READING

When the Worst That Can Happen Already Has: Conquering Life's Most Difficult Times, by Dennis Wholey

Memory Book for Bereaved Children, by Kathleen Braza. 1-800-473-HEAL

The Grieving Child: A Parent's Guide, by Helen Fitzgerald

When Someone You Know is Hurting: What You Can Do to Help, by Gregory Richards

Giving Comfort: What You Can Do When Someone You Love is Ill, by Linda Breiner Milstein

Divorce Book for Parents, by Vicki Lansky