Coping with Grief and Loss

A Recovery Lesson
Grief and loss are natural parts of life, but they can seem even more overwhelming when you also have a mental illness.

We’ll discuss some ways to help you get through the painful times and keep your recovery on track.

Grief and loss is a process that can lead to acceptance.

Healthy grief can even bring meaning and growth to your life.
Goals and Objectives

- To be more aware of grief and loss, and its effects on your recovery. To cope with grief and loss in healthier ways.
  - To describe 2 ways you respond to grief and loss
  - To list a protective factor you have (that helps you avoid complicated grief)
  - To discuss how you can cope better with grief or loss
  - Optional: To rate your grief by completing a Grief Checklist
What are grief and loss?

- **Grief**
  - Deep distress caused by loss or bereavement (loss of a loved one by death)

- **Loss**
  - Losing something you possessed
  - Being deprived of something because of separation

- **Sorrow**
  - Deep distress, sadness, or regret, especially for the loss of something (or someone)
What happens when people grieve?

- Sadness comes from being suddenly, painfully deprived of something.
- If they lost someone they loved, there is heartache (even if that person was suffering at the end of life).
- There is fear because the survivor’s world has changed and what is ahead is unknown.
- There is insecurity as “their world is crumbling.”
- People that are usually strong may cry, they may say or do impulsive things, or “go to pieces.”
- They may not know where to go, or who to turn to.
Myths and Facts about grief

• **Myth**: The pain of loss will go away faster if you ignore it.
• **Fact**: Trying to ignore the pain of grief will only make it worse. – Face it and find true healing.
• **Myth**: You should “be strong” when you are grieving.
• **Fact**: Sadness, fear, or loneliness are some of the many normal reactions to loss. Crying or “breaking down” doesn’t mean you are weak.
• Rather than putting on a “brave front,” show your true feelings. Then, other people can help you (and sometimes you can also help them).
• **Myth**: If you don’t cry, it means you aren’t grieving.

• **Fact**: Crying is a normal response, but it’s not the only one. People who don’t cry may feel the pain of loss just as deeply, but have other ways of showing it. – They need just as much support and comfort.

• **Myth**: Grief should last about a year.

• **Fact**: There is no right time frame for grieving. How long it takes to recover from loss is different for everyone.
More Myths and Facts

- **Myth**: Moving on with your life means you are forgetting about the one you lost.
- **Fact**: Moving on means you have accepted your loved one’s death. - That isn’t the same as forgetting. Your loved one’s memory will always be a part of you.

- **Myth**: It is best to not talk about the person that died.
- **Fact**: People usually want and need to talk about their loss – maybe even over and over. It’s OK to talk about it, but don’t pry or force the conversation.
More Myths and Facts

• **Myth:** Saying “I know how you feel” is a good way to express sympathy.
• **Fact:** People grieve in different ways. You can’t possibly know what another person is going through after a loss.
• It may seem like you are “making light of” how deep the person’s pain truly is.
• If you don’t know what to do or say, try asking the person what would help them.
• Just being with them and listening to them is the most important way to help.
Do other people grieve the same way as you do? - No. There are a lot of different ways people can grieve.

How do you feel when you are grieving?

There are many “normal” grief emotions and physical symptoms on the next slide:
Some normal grief emotions

- Sad
- Hurt
- Horrified
- Afraid
- Miserable
- Lonely
- Shocked
- Questioning
- Thoughtful
- Overwhelmed
- Irritable
- Regretful
- Surprised
- Angry
- Numb
- Disappointed
- Envious
- Undecided
- Relieved
- Frustrated
- Self-blame
- Anxious
Some physical grief symptoms:

- Tightness in chest/throat
- Feeling breathless or dizzy
- Heart palpitations (feeling a racing or pounding heartbeat)
- Overly sensitive to noise
- Nothing seems real
- Weak or tense muscles
- Lack of energy, fatigue
- Dry mouth, queasy stomach, or nausea
- Feeling like there is a lump in your throat
- Headaches
Normal thoughts when grieving for someone who died may include:

- Disbelief – It feels like nothing that is happening is real
- Anger and blaming
- Confusion
- Being unable to concentrate
- Thinking “too much” about the person who died
- Sense of the person who died being there with you
- Dreaming about the person who died
- Feeling of “going crazy”
- Sadness or depression
Some normal grief behaviors:

- Not being able to sleep
- Poor appetite
- Crying
- Sighing or yawning a lot
- Being “absent-minded” and not organized
- Restless or overactive
- Social withdrawal
- Doing things like the person who died
Why do people grieve differently?

- **Gender** – Males and females are taught different ways to handle stress and emotions.
- **Age and life experiences** – Your understanding of death and your sense of self is important to how you experience a loss.
- **Culture and faith** – Beliefs, responses, and rituals may help to honor someone who has died.
- **Personality** – Coping with a loss can be different if a person is outgoing, shy, expressive, or withdrawn.
Possible reactions from others

- **Apathy** – Not seeming concerned - “I’m tired of hearing about it. I’ve done all I can. You have to deal with it yourself.”

- **Sympathy** – Feeling sorry for, and always being there to do things for the other person - “You poor thing. Let me do that for you so you don’t have to.”

- **Empathy** – Having compassion and relating to someone
  - Entering into their feelings (but not taking them upon yourself).
  - “Walking in their shoes.” Supporting them without judging.
  - “This is a really tough time for you, and I want to help you get through it.”
Discussion

- Which reaction from other people seems to be the most helpful?
- How would you want people to respond to you when you are grieving?
- How did people respond when you experienced grief or loss?
- What are some things that you grieve about that are not deaths?
Other losses that could cause grief

- A distressing childhood, an unhappy family life, or a divorce
- Illness, disability, emotional or behavior problems, natural disasters or accidents
- Financial problems or loss of a job can sometimes cause a loss of both self-respect and security.
- Damage (physical and relationship losses) can be caused by addictive behavior
- Loss of privacy
- Not getting credit for what you do – Not feeling “good enough”
- Unable to work, or when retiring – May feel less self-worth
- Older children moving out – having an “empty nest”
Take a mindfulness break

- Sit comfortably and take some deep breaths.
- Watch **Positive Thinking Slideshow** on YouTube.com (2:41 minutes at [http://youtu.be/QETqNwmmlms](http://youtu.be/QETqNwmmlms) and discuss whether or not you agree with the last quotation.
Stages of the Loss Process

- Grief is natural after a loss, or a death - A person has “grief work” to do.
- Remember, “Sorrow is the price for having loved someone.” (If you didn’t care about them, you would not be grieving.)
- The 5 stages of loss originally described by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross can happen in any order:
  - Denial
  - Bargaining
  - Anger
  - Despair
  - Acceptance
Stages of Loss

- **Stage 1 – Denial**
  - “It didn’t happen. When I wake up, everything will be OK.”
  - People may act childlike, and want to be reassured that nothing is wrong, or to withdraw from, avoid, or reject the truth.

- **Stage 2 – Bargaining**
  - “If things will go back to the way they were, I will do whatever I’m supposed to do.”
  - “I’ll keep looking for a way to make things right – I need answers.”
  - People may ignore real needs to pursue a “cure.”
  - They may try to change things, to stop the loss from happening.
More Stages of Loss

- **Stage 3: Anger**
  - “I am angry with God, the insurance company, and the doctors.”
  - “I should have… I could have…”
  - “It was their fault. I blame them for her death.”
  - “How could she leave us?”
  - Sometimes people are aggressive along with their anger, and it may be directed at the closest “target.”
  - They may have resentment toward the people involved.
  - Resolve anger by letting it out. – If it is held in, it can lead to depression, or it can drain our emotional energy.
More Stages of Loss

- **Stage 4 - Despair**
  - “I am overwhelmed, and hurt. I’ll never be able to enjoy life again.”
  - “I feel like I am in a deep, dark place. All I can do is cry.”
  - “When I sit silently, I think about death or depressing things.”
  - “Somehow it was my fault. I’m being punished for the bad things I did.”
  - “God doesn’t care about me, or it wouldn’t have happened.”
- People need support as they work through despair and begin to cope.
Stage 5 - Acceptance

- “Now I understand what happened and how it affects me.”
- “I know that I need help.”
- “I will do what it takes to get through this. Let’s talk about my options.”

We become more kind and patient with ourselves, expressing emotions freely, and knowing that personal growth can come from experiencing losses.

We adjust our lives after a loss, and base our decisions on reality, instead of irrational beliefs or fantasy.
The “Don’ts” of Grief
(By Sister Monica Ann Lucas)

- Don’t condemn or say “if only.”
- Don’t dwell on nagging doubts or blame.
- No one can predict what might happen or prevent all bad things.
- You can’t truly change the behavior and actions of others (unless they want to change).
- Don’t drug yourself to postpone the reality and expression of grief.
- Don’t feel sorry for yourself. – It makes you feel worse.
- Don’t run away. – Face the problem before “getting away for a while.”
More “Don’ts of Grief”

• Don’t withdraw – You need the strength of others, and the world needs you in it.
• Make a special effort to restore healthy spirituality.
• Don’t pay too much attention to what others say – People who are trying to be helpful may say something like “It is better this way,” when it would have been better to say nothing. Don’t get distressed by words.
• Don’t cross bridges until you come to them. – You may have fear and anxiety if you look too far into the future.
• Don’t underestimate yourself. – Your strength may surprise you.
The outcome of bereavement can be affected by:
- The situation being sudden, or if it was an expected loss
- Personal factors, like whether or not you are emotionally unstable, or if you are coping well
- Social factors, like whether or not you have emotional support from family and friends
- Protective factors such as having religious beliefs, and good self-esteem.

Optional discussion: Name one of your protective factors.
Optional Discussion

• Read A Grief Story.
• “What helped the person in the story cope with grief and loss?”
• “Was the grieving normal?”
• “How would you know if it was abnormal or unhealthy?”
• “What are some irrational thoughts that people can have when they are grieving?”
Irrational beliefs about despair

- I have to stay strong and in control - It’s not ladylike (or manly) to cry in public.
- Life is supposed to be fair. - No one should have to hurt like this.
- No one else can help. They don’t understand how I’m feeling.
- I must be going crazy. – It can’t be normal to feel this way.
- I shouldn’t be crying anymore, after so much time has passed.
- I have to get back to what I was doing. – That way I won’t have to think about it.
Negative responses to despair

• Grief can lead to or worsen depression, anxiety, or other illnesses. Sometimes it includes:
  • Violence
  • Chemical dependency or other addictions
  • Extreme risk-taking or self-destructive behavior
  • Self-blame
• Overwhelming, unhealthy despair can lead to suicide.
• Couples may break up if one of them can’t resolve their despair.
“Although people often blame themselves or feel guilty about deaths of a loved one, is it usually a realistic, rational thought?” No.

“How would you respond to someone who feels guilty after someone they care about dies?” Listen closely to their concerns, then reassure them that it wasn’t their fault.

“You would have kept them safe and alive if you had the ability to control what happened.”

“Sometimes bad things happen to good people.”
Effects of complicated grief

- Research on people who lost a spouse showed a link between complicated/traumatic grief, disability, and using too few health services.
- People in the traumatic grief group had an episode of major depression, high blood pressure, and more disability (Prigerson et al, 2001).
- Research showed that people with complicated grief identified more life stressors, less social support, and decreased mental health and well-being.
- They had less ability to function in life’s roles, and more symptoms of health problems (Ott, 2003).
Find meaning

- Try to make sense of your loss with your beliefs and view of the world. - If it doesn’t make sense, try to look at the loss in other ways:
  - The person may have relief (if pain and suffering had ended).
  - You can continue a connection through good memories.
  - Look at any positive benefits, like:
    - Growth in character or spiritual growth
    - Strengthening relationships
    - Being able to see things in new ways
Grief and loss are a part of people’s lives that can’t be avoided unless you never care about anything or anyone.

Grieving in a healthy way is important for your health, relationships, and mood.

Using the coping skills you have learned can increase your sense of self-control.

Working through grief and loss by getting the help you need can help you grow as a person and find its meaning.

Learning to handle grief in a healthy way can help prevent having a relapse during your recovery.
References

This lesson was developed in 2009 and revised 6-2-15 by Mary Knutson RN.