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## Understanding Grief

Cooperative Extension South Dakota State University

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# Understanding Grief



Cooperative Extension Service  
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# Understanding Grief

## GRIEF IS UNIVERSAL

Sorrow finds its way into the lives of all of us. Often it is associated with the loss of a loved one in death, but it is not limited to bereavement.

Grief may result from other circumstances. Little children who feel rejected by members of their family circle may grieve for many years. Grief may be the result of separation during war times. It may come when your firstborn leaves home for a distant university or job. It may come when the last child leaves the "nest." It may result from moving from your home of 54 years to an apartment, mobile home, or nursing home. Whatever its cause, grief is an emotional pain which all of us somewhere, sometime experience.

Normally grief diminishes in severity with the passage of time. That doesn't mean that we will reach the point that bereavement ceases to be; the feeling of loss will always be with us. A remembered song, a forgotten snapshot may flood us with emotion and memories years later.

Lynn Caine in Widow wrote that grief is a healing process, not a disease. She said that if only someone whom she had respected had said to her after her husband's death: "Now, Lynn, bereavement is a wound. It's like being very, very badly hurt. But you are healthy. You are strong. You will recover. But recovery will be slow. You will grieve and that is painful. Your grief will have many stages but all of them will be healing. Little by little you will be whole again."

She continued, "I like to think I would have had the sense to benefit from such wise counsel, that I would have asked, just as one asks the doctor when told an operation is necessary: What will it entail? How long will it take? How much will it hurt? When will I be my joyful self again?"<sup>1</sup>

There are no pat answers to such questions. They will differ with each of us,

but there is a pattern. There are distinct phases or stages of grief, and stage follows stage as spring follows winter.

It is not what happens to us, but how we deal with situations that will determine the end result. Author Stanley Cornils says, "If life throws a dagger at us, there are two ways to catch it--either by the handle or the blade.

"Grief does not have to run like a prairie fire out of control--it can and ought to be intelligently managed."<sup>2</sup>

## THE STAGES OF GRIEF

We cannot avoid the natural progression of grief, and we should not want to. When one is grieving, it is easy to forget that happiness has its price and that love must be paid for. The coin that we pay is grief. In experiencing the grieving process and accepting it, painful as it is, we grow in warmth, understanding, and wisdom.

There are seven stages in the grieving process:

1. Shock
2. Disorganization
3. Volatile emotions
4. Guilt
5. Loss and loneliness
6. Relief
7. Recovery

The stabilizing force that holds a person together is hope--in fantasy at first, then in the promise of a new life.

The stages of grief are in no way separate; they intertwine and overlap. Some may last only a few minutes, and flashbacks are common in the grieving process. Months or years later certain phases of grief will recur.

### Stage 1: SHOCK

The first stage is shock--a numbness. There is an emotional inability to accept reality. Everything inside shouts "no." The mind struggles to escape, and a fre-

quent refuge is asking the unanswerable "why?"

Some people in this stage of grieving can't hear. They may ask questions but these are more statements of disbelief. This is a kind of human way of parrying with reality until one can get in control.

Tears may be the first reaction for some. They may become hysterical. Explosions can be therapeutic.

Another manifestation is withdrawal. We cannot expect introverts to suddenly explode under crisis. It is cruel to encourage what is contrary to one's style of expressing emotion. The very private person may say little, but needs to be supported and comforted by the presence of loving, significant persons.

During the moments of shock and denial, the best role of a comforter is physical presence and accepting listening. The woman needs physical touching: a holding close, your hand on her shoulder, a warm hand clasp.

A few words of repetitive assurance are important antidotes. This is not the time for explanations, cliches, or even religious comfort. Words cannot be heard. Physical presence is enough. We need to let the grieving person choose when to return from the land of shock to the real world. At the same time a grieving person needs to be kept in touch with a loving part of the world.

Our national customs tend to put all mourners into an identical mold. We expect a widow to show traditional private and public responses to the loss of a husband. We give almost identical condolence to widows bereaved by tragic or sudden death as to one bereaved by a lingering illness. Their comfort needs may be very different.

## Stage 2: DISORGANIZATION

The second stage of grief is one of disorganization. It is a period of confusion; the grieving person may feel out of touch with the ordinary proceedings of life. There is a need to cry and cry, to talk and talk. The substance of talking may be foolish. Actions may be out of character.

Some widows shy away from decisions during this period; others plunge reck-

lessly into actions which they later regret. It is wise for most widows not to make major decisions such as selling the house, or moving to another city or state during this period.

## Stage 3: VOLATILE EMOTIONS

Terror, anger, and resentment are signs of this stage. The grieving person may exhibit feelings of helplessness, hurt, and frustration. Anger is a natural part of grief.

Some widows get caught up in shame--"I ought not to feel this way!" "How can I say such things?"

It is best to get these feelings out, not let them simmer inside and interfere with growth through the grieving process. Not everyone needs explosive expression. Some of us can allow anger to surface and simmer away silently. For others of us, talking openly helps us lose our feelings of anger.

## Stage 4: GUILT

It is important to remember that the stages of grief are intertwined and overlapping. Guilt and anger may intertwine. When you love someone, you will say things you regret. When that person dies or moves away, you suddenly realize all the things you wanted to say and didn't. You remember words you wish had not been said or actions you wish had not taken place.

It is human to feel guilty. At the same time you may be angry. You want another chance to erase neglect or failure. Children who have neglected to visit an elderly parent as often as they feel they should may suffer guilt feelings when the parent dies.

This is the period of the "if only's:" "If only he had . . . . If only I could have. . . ."

A widow or widower in this stage needs trusted friends and relatives who will listen patiently. They need to tell how badly they feel and know they won't be rejected.

## Stage 5: LOSS AND LONELINESS

This is probably the most painful stage of the grieving process. The reality of the loss is not obvious at first. Gradually the finality is felt--an empty chair

near the TV, an unused pillow, an extra toothbrush, a missing phone call.

Sadness and depression follow and self-pity is frequent. Problems, which are manageable when shared with someone, become magnified when faced alone.

During this stage some persons search for a quick replacement.

Ultimately loneliness is conquered by building a new independence or developing a new and meaningful relationship. It takes bravery and education to allow the depth and meaning of a lost relationship to be totally experienced. We are more likely to find freedom and happiness in the future if we complete the grieving process before seeking a new partner or friend or making any final commitment.

#### Stage 6: RELIEF

Feelings of relief that characterize this stage are difficult to admit and acknowledge openly. Relief is so intermingled with our sense of loss we cannot see it isolated enough to take it for what it is--a normal, human response.

A feeling of relief does not imply any criticism for the love we lost. A woman needs a friend or relative with whom she can talk about her sense of relief without indictment or adding a feeling of guilt or shame. There is an overlap between the stages of relief and recovery. In fact, feelings of relief may be the beginning of the recovery stage.

#### Stage 7: RECOVERY

This stage begins slowly. Hope begins to soften feelings of guilt, anger, and the sense of loss. As hope grows stronger, a new life begins with constructive efforts to reach out and build anew.

Recovery doesn't occur at once. You must expect anxiety and guilt in the beginning.

Some people who have lost and grieved tell of being pushed too fast into the recovery period, when all they wanted was encouragement to see a show, visit an old friend, to know it is all right to look happy.

Lynn Caine describes recovery this way. "I wanted to taste life again. Suddenly I was frantically impatient with my whole

way of life. More and more I wanted to clear away the worries and problems. . . . Everyday I was stronger, more confident, more involved."

Concluding, she wrote, "Acceptance finally comes. And with it peace. . . . Today I am more independent. I have more understanding, more sympathy. I have a quiet love for Martin. He will always be a part of me. . . . But Martin is dead. And I am a different woman."<sup>3</sup>

#### OBSERVATIONS OF TWO WIDOWS

A widow wrote to Ann Landers complaining that after her husband's funeral so many people came to her and said, "If there is anything we can do, please call." Then she never heard from them again.

A reader responded that she had been such a friend. When a recent widow did not call, the reader called to ask, "How are you? Can I help?" The answer was, "Everything's fine." Even though the reader knew it was not, she didn't feel she could press further.

She commented, "Now I am on the other side. I am the one who needs friends and emotional support. When a friend called to ask how I was, it took courage to tell the truth and say, "Things aren't good, I'm very lonely. I need your love and companionship. Please come to my house for supper--or I'll come to yours."

The friend thanked her for her honesty and with other friends, helped the reader through some very lonely times. The reader said, "I had to let them know I needed their help."

She went on to say that there are times when we must reach out for love and support, and not be too proud or sensitive to let others know we need them.

Margaret Olwine wrote of the rallying around of friends and relatives when her husband died unexpectedly.<sup>4</sup>

Mrs. Olwine believes the 2- to 4-day process of making arrangements, welcoming and talking with friends and relatives, with being concerned that beds are provided for out-of-towners, and with feeding them are merciful distractions. She does not believe the gathering-in and the ceremony should be done away with. She was comforted and sustained by it.

Mrs. Olwine wrote of the awkward and uneasy feeling we have in the face of grief. She said it didn't matter how awkwardly an arm is laid across a shoulder or how over-acted a look of sympathy can be. The words may be trite and the response likewise. The important thing is that the gestures are made and the words are spoken.

## LEARNING TO COPE WITH BEING ALONE

You are alone. You feel empty, that "half of myself is missing." The emptiness of a mourning woman comes because she has seen herself as part of a team--two friends, a mother and child, or a wife. Now she doesn't know who she is.

Another woman who has grieved can help. She will understand. But a woman must not allow herself to sink into a world of lonely women. There is a vast difference between loneliness and alone-ness.

Loneliness is to be expected, and there is nothing wrong with feeling "blue" some days.

But being alone is a different matter. There a woman can exert her will. She can refill her empty life--not by deliberately shutting out all thoughts of the lost one, but by gradually becoming more receptive to the world around her. It is still an exciting world, and even if she is alone a woman can expect that one day she again will enjoy new experiences, new friends.

A woman alone may have as many years ahead of her as she spent in marriage or motherhood or friendship.

How are you going to spend them?

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## References

1. Caine, Lynn. Widow. Wm. Morrow & Co, 1974.
2. Cornils, S.P. Managing grief wisely. Baker Book House, 1967.
3. Caine, Widow, p. 222.
4. Olwine, Margaret. "When you're the partner left behind," Kansas City Star Magazine, Jan. 27, 1974.

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