

# What is Grief?

## understanding suicide and grief

*'The act of living is different all through.'*  
C.S. Lewis

*'... there are many goals that can be set, many ways to feel, and no set series of stages to pass through – many forms of expression and behavioural patterns are acceptable reactions to loss ...'* (adapted from Stroebe, Stroebe & Hansson, 1993)

Grief is a universal experience. It is a human response to a loss of someone we love and value. However, it can also be a very difficult experience.

It can be helpful to recognise that grief is a process and that each person experiences grief in a unique way. The following factors may influence how grief is experienced:

- relationship with the person who died
- the circumstances surrounding their death
- how emotional distress has been managed in the past
- the support network.

The experience of grief can sometimes be very intense. Some people feel they are 'going mad' as grief affects the whole of our being and can leave us feeling out of control and overwhelmed.

We need to give ourselves and others permission to grieve and be patient when the process seems to be taking what we consider to be a long time.

Grief is expressed in many ways and there is no specific timeline for the

experience. Most people become aware that life will never be the same as it was and in time learn to integrate the reality of the loss into their lives. Eventually, the loved one who died can become part of life in a new way.

Over time the pain should get less. Most people start to recognise they are having more frequent and longer times when they feel more energy and hope. They may notice their memories are not as painful for as long, although this pain may never go away altogether.

Seeking out professional assistance can be helpful for some people.

### Common grief responses

Some of the common responses to grief are:

#### Behavioural

Isolation, social withdrawal, intolerance of others, loss of interest in others, tearfulness, restlessness.

#### Cognitive

Confusion, forgetfulness, racing mind, poor concentration, difficulty in making decisions, a sense of unreality, repeated disturbing imagery.

#### Emotional

Shock, disbelief, sadness, distress, numbness, anxiety, guilt, fear, anger, helplessness.

#### Physical

Change in appetite, change in sleeping, tiredness, headaches, colds.

### Support After Suicide

PO Box 271  
Richmond VIC 3121

Phone: 9421 7640

Fax: 9421 7698

Email:  
aftersuicide@jss.org.au

Web:  
supportaftersuicide.org.au

A program of  
Jesuit Social Services

## Spiritual

Loss of meaning, loss of direction, questioning faith/beliefs, searching for understanding.

## Ways of living with the experience of grief

- be gentle and take time for yourself: have a longer bath/shower, go on walks, sit in a warm nurturing space, visit special places you connect with your loved one, breathe deeply
- give yourself time to remember, to look at photos, to share stories, to laugh and cry
- create a memory book or a memory box
- involve yourself in some light activity: golf, walking, fishing
- create or build a special memento to your loved one: a garden, a CD, photo album or video
- be with people you are comfortable spending time with in conversation or in silence
- prepare for special days and holidays with your family/friends. Christmas, birthdays and anniversaries can be difficult times. Plan a visit to the cemetery, light a candle or maybe spend some time at the person's favourite place
- make resolutions for new and renewed directions in your life and in the life of your family
- keep a journal. Fill it with your thoughts and memories. Take time to reflect and think
- avoid increased use of alcohol, smoking, prescription medication and other drugs
- avoid too much coffee and tea to help you sleep at night

## Supporting a grieving person

- contact the person when you hear of the death. Tell them you are sorry to hear of their loss, or send a card or flowers
- maintain contact personally or by telephone, notes, cards. Visits need not be long
- LISTEN: This is possibly the most important thing you can do
- invite them to talk about the person who has died, mention the person's name, ask to see photos, share stories
- accept their behaviour – crying, screaming, being quiet, laughing. Allow expressions of anger, guilt and blame

- offer practical help, such as bringing in a cooked meal, taking care of the children, cutting the grass, shopping
- really try to understand and accept the person. Everyone is different
- be patient. People may need to tell their story over and over again without interruption or judgement
- include children and young people in the grieving process
- be aware of and acknowledge special times that might be significant for the bereaved person such as Christmas, anniversaries, birthdays, Father's Day, etc.
- realise your feelings of awkwardness and helplessness are normal. Listening and 'being with' the person who is grieving can be a wonderful support
- avoid saying things like 'Cheer up', 'He's at peace now', 'It's God's will'
- look after yourself. To support a grieving person you need to maintain your own well-being

## Support available

Go to the 'Finding Help' page of the Support After Suicide website: [www.supportaftersuicide.org.au](http://www.supportaftersuicide.org.au)

### Lifeline

13 11 14

### Suicide Callback Service

1300 659 467

### Hope For Life

1300 467 354

For those who have lost a loved one to suicide.

### Kids Help Line

1800 55 1800

(5 to 25 years)

### Mensline <http://www.menslineaus.org.au/>

1300 78 99 78

### Suiceline (VIC)

1300 651 251

## Websites

Support After Suicide

[www.supportaftersuicide.org.au](http://www.supportaftersuicide.org.au)

Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement

[www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au)

GriefLink [www.grieflink.asn.au](http://www.grieflink.asn.au)