



# Coping With Grief

REV. SONIA HEBERT

**G**rief is inevitable. Everyone experiences grief at some time during their life. Grief is the normal response of sorrow, emotion, and confusion that comes from losing someone or something important to you. It is a natural part of life. Grief is a typical reaction to death, divorce, job loss, a move away from friends and family, or loss of good health due to illness. The more significant the loss, the more intense the grief. However, even subtle losses can lead to grief. For example, you might experience grief after moving away from home, graduating from college, changing jobs, selling your family home, or retiring from a career you loved.

The following excerpt taken from Gary Collins' *Christian Counselling: A Comprehensive Guide* demonstrates that people experience grief differently and no two experiences are the same.

***Mildred and Helen are both widows. They live in the same neighbourhood, attend the same church, and are only four years apart in age. Both of their husbands died within the past year.***

***Mildred's husband had cancer. His illness was discovered about a year before his death and, despite surgery and the best medical treatment available, his condition grew steadily worse as the months passed. Mildred devoted herself to caring for the man to whom she had been married for more than forty years. When he was hospitalized, she visited every day. When he was at home, she cared for him tenderly, even at the end when she was exhausted...***

***With reluctance and only at the urging of her children and doctor, Mildred finally agreed to let her husband return to the hospital where he spent the last days of his life. In the year after his illness, this couple had talked openly and often about death, about***

*heaven, about their life together, about the things they regretted, and the pleasant memories they shared. They even talked about the coming funeral and how Mildred would cope as a widow.*

*Helen and her husband had no similar conversations. During a vacation trip to Florida, within weeks of retiring from his company, he collapsed in a restaurant and was dead on arrival at the local hospital. A massive heart attack had taken his life and jolted Helen into widowhood.*

*Months later these two Christian women continue to grieve, but it is clear to others that they are handling their grief differently. Mildred seems to be picking up life and is learning to live as a widow. Helen remains cloistered in her apartment. She was unwilling to go out, often refuses to answer the phone, and doesn't even want the grandchildren she once doted over. Helen cries a lot, spends a lot of time in self-pity, continually reviews that fateful trip to Florida, and wonders what she or the paramedics might have done to save her husband's life. Helen keeps telling herself and anyone else who will listen that life for her will never be worth living again - ever.*

*When their husbands were alive. Mildred and Helen were good friends who often would chat after church. Now as they mourn the deaths of their husbands these two widows seem to be going in different directions. Each is handling grief in a way that differs from the other.*

## Common Symptoms of Grief

While loss affects people in different ways, many people experience the following symptoms when they're grieving. Be aware that almost anything that you experience in the

early stages of grief is normal — including feeling like you're going crazy, feeling like you're in a bad dream, or questioning your religious beliefs.



- **Shock and disbelief** — Right after a loss, it can be hard to accept what happened. You may feel numb, have trouble believing that the loss really happened, or even deny the truth. If someone you love has died, you may keep expecting them to show up, even though you know they're gone.

- **Sadness** — Profound sadness is probably the most universally experienced symptom of grief. You may have feelings of emptiness, despair,

yearning, or deep loneliness. You may also cry a lot or feel emotionally unstable.

- **Guilt** – You may regret or feel guilty about things you did or didn't say or do. You may also feel guilty about certain feelings (e.g. feeling relieved when the person died after a long, difficult illness). After a death, you may even feel guilty for not doing something to prevent the death, even if there was nothing more you could have done.
- **Anger** – Even if the loss was nobody's fault, you may feel angry and resentful. If you lost a loved one, you may be angry at yourself, God, the doctors, or even the person who died for abandoning you. You may feel the need to blame someone for the injustice that was done to you.
- **Fear** – A significant loss can trigger a host of worries and fears. You may feel anxious, helpless, or insecure. You may even have panic attacks. The death of a loved one can trigger fears about your own mortality, of facing life without that person, or the responsibilities you now face alone.
- **Physical symptoms** – We often think of grief as a strictly emotional process, but grief often involves physical problems, including fatigue, nausea,

lowered immunity, weight loss or weight gain, aches and pains, and insomnia.

If you are experiencing any of these emotions following a loss, it may help to know that your reaction is natural and that you'll heal in time. However, not everyone who is grieving goes through all of these stages – and that's okay. Contrary to popular belief, you do not have to go through each stage in order to heal. In fact, some people resolve their grief without going through any of these stages. And if you do go through these stages of grief, you probably won't experience them in a neat, sequential order, so don't worry about what you "should" be feeling or which stage you're supposed to be in.

## Tips for Coping with Grief

- Take your time and limit "shoulds". Don't judge your reactions.
- Talk. Share your feelings and the meaning this loss has for you.
- Pay attention to what your body needs. Exercise, adequate rest & sleep, and balanced nutrition are essential.
- Participate in meaningful rituals and ceremonies such as a funeral or memorial service.
- Surround yourself with friends and family who love and support you. Don't isolate yourself.

- Be patient with yourself. Tears may come unexpectedly, even when you thought you were finished grieving.
- Consistently take time to grieve, as well as giving yourself breaks from the grieving process.
- Strive to find a balanced way of dealing with the demands of daily life.
- Whenever possible, put off major decisions (e.g., changing jobs or residence).
- Pray, meditate, reflect, and connect with your religious and spiritual convictions and community.
- Be sensitive to and flexible with your new needs and changes in lifestyle.



## Helping Others Grieve

- **Be available.** (Call, send a card, stop by to talk, share a meal or activity.)
- **Communicate.** (Initiate conversation, listen, be willing to talk about the loss.)
- **Allow expression of feelings.** (Listening is more powerful than advice-giving.)
- **Avoid making judgments.** (Understand and accept differences in grieving and coping.)
- **Be patient.** (Expect ups and downs, but not a convenient time schedule).
- **Be sensitive.** (Remember times and events that may be especially hard for the grieving person.)
- **Encourage physical, emotional, and social self-care.** (Also encourage openness to the support of others and professional help, if appropriate.)
- **Accept your own limitations.** (Your support is important, but you cannot take away someone's pain.)

## When grief doesn't go away

It's normal to feel sad, numb, or angry following a loss. But as time passes, these emotions should become less intense as you accept the loss and start to move forward. If you aren't feeling better over time, or your grief is getting worse, it may be a sign that your grief has developed into a more serious problem, such as complicated grief or major depression.

