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## Understanding Your Grief

Grief is a perfectly normal response to the death of your loved one. It is an adjustment process that allows you gradually to accept your loss. The process is the same whether you are grieving the loss of a spouse, child, parent, brother, sister, or other significant person. However, since the most important of all relationships is usually that which exists with one's spouse, the grieving then is likely to be more intensified. Psychologists state that the death of one's spouse is frequently the most traumatic of all events with which a person has to cope.

During the grieving period certain predictable events will take place. You may discover that your feelings are often very uncomfortable and even frightening, unless you realize that these feelings are normal and are similar to the feelings that nearly all bereaved persons experience. Whatever you do, don't feel that you must be stoic, and that you shouldn't be burdening other family members or friends with your grief. The death of your loved one is a great loss and it is necessary to acknowledge it not only to one's self but also to others. The adjustment will be easier if all family members, including children, feel free in expressing their grief. Generally, family members feel a bond of unity and are supportive of one another as they openly grieve together. To avoid talking about the loss is merely delaying a process which is necessary before you can effectively adjust to an altered life.

**IMMEDIATE REACTION TO DEATH** - During the first few hours up to a period of several days following the death of your loved one, you may experience feelings of numbness, shock and disbelief as well as a sense of unreality. A widower's comment, "It was almost as though it were happening to another person and I was merely an on looker," depicts the emotional insulation which initially protects you from the overwhelming reality of your loss. Other people have described these emotions as a bad dream from which the dreamer would awaken.

**AS REALIZATION OF DEATH TAKES PLACE** - Following feelings of numbness and disbelief, you will begin gradually to realize or actualize that the loss is real and permanent. During these early days of bereavement, you will have a great need to "hold

on" to the deceased. This "holding on" includes dwelling on memories connected with the deceased - reliving those last few hours or even the last few days of the deceased's life, and recalling bits of conversation shared with your loved one during those hours together.

Shortly after the death of your loved one you may realize that while other relatives and friends have returned to their old routines, your whole world seems to have fallen apart. Some people have described this feeling as one of great "emptiness" while others have stated, "It's as though a part of my body is gone." You may find that you are so preoccupied with thoughts of your deceased one that you are having difficulty in concentrating and remembering.

Making the simplest of decisions may be overwhelming to you at this time. Many tasks will be done automatically. There is often an inability to maintain an interest in those other relationships and activities which formerly provided pleasure. Without being aware of doing so, you may be internalizing and incorporating the significant and unique values, mannerisms, and behavior patterns of the deceased into your own behavior. In identifying with the deceased, you may even be thinking that you yourself now have some of the same symptoms which your loved one had. Since emotions affect your physical functions, it is reasonable to expect some physical disturbances such as insomnia, loss of appetite, muscle tenseness, or other minor disturbances.

In addition to your feelings of despair and loneliness, you may feel that you no longer have control over your own emotions. Painful as the above are, they are all a part of the normal grieving process. However, there is usually also an intensifying of faith which gives you sufficient inner strength to carry you through this difficult period.

**SENSORY PERCEPTION OF THE DECEASED** - Vivid dreams involving the deceased are common occurrences in the early phases of the grieving process. You may also experience the feeling at various times that you are hearing or seeing the deceased - yet at the same time you realize that this is not actually so. These experiences can be very frightening and may cause you to ponder as to whether you are losing your mind. Be assured that these are normal occurrences and will diminish with time.

**FEELING OF GUILT AND ANGER** - Guilt feelings almost always accompany the loss of a loved one. In your bereavement you may feel guilt for all the things left unsaid or undone as you realize it is now too late to complete all that "unfinished" business between the deceased and you. You may be haunted with thoughts such as "Would my loved one still be living if I had only called the doctor sooner?", or "Why wasn't I a little more demonstrative of my affection?". If the death followed a prolonged illness, you may have felt a sense of relief at the time only to have these feelings later give way to feelings of shame and guilt. As the survivor you may feel guilty merely because you survive. It is also fairly common to experience some feelings of anger following a death of your loved one.

You may subconsciously feel anger that the deceased has "deserted" you and caused you to suffer this terrible loneliness. Or you may experience some feeling of anger because of

all the added responsibilities that have suddenly been heaped upon your shoulders. Since you may be unaware of the source of this anger, there is generally only a subtle expression of these feelings. Frequently this subtle expression of anger will be directed towards others, especially towards the doctor and nurses who were caring for the deceased at the time of death. You may feel that the medical personnel did not do all that they might have done to have prevented the death. You may even find yourself questioning how a merciful and loving God could have allowed your loved one to die when your need for the deceased is so great. Then you may even feel more guilt for having had these feelings of doubt and anger. Feelings of guilt and anger are normal reactions following the death of a loved one and these feelings will gradually subside.

**ANXIETY IN ADJUSTMENT** - If the death has been that of your spouse, you will suffer not only over the loss of your loved one, but also over the depletion of yourself. Your world has suddenly changed and you will fear the unknown as well as the loss of emotional security. You will now have to reorganize your life and adjust to a myriad of changes which will virtually amount to a new life style. The multiple changes which will have to be made by necessity and not by choice may cause you much anxiety. An additional burden to be borne is that of an identity adjustment. When your identity has been closely linked to that of your spouse, it is difficult to think in terms of yourself apart from your deceased spouse. It takes time to adjust to the change from "We" to the "I" status. There will be feelings of rootlessness as you make that emotional transition to your newly imposed single status.

**LENGTH OF GRIEVING PROCESS** - Each person responds at a different pace in the bereavement process. Your entire grieving may be completed within three to six months, while it may take as long as a year or more. The factors which influence the length of time for the resolution of your loss will depend upon the intensity of your relationship with the loved one; the suddenness of the death (some of the grieving process may have been initiated and partially completed prior to the death if the death was of a slow, insidious nature); your ability to express your grief rather than trying to avoid facing and coping with the loss; and finally your personal philosophy of life and death.

**RESOLUTION OF LOSS** - With the passing of time there will be a gradual severing of the bereaved's thoughts and emotional ties. As you loosen your hold upon the past, you will become more aware of the happenings in your immediate environment. Gradually you will not only renew your interest in those former relationships and activities which once afforded you pleasure but you may become involved in new and additional relationships and activities to fill that void produced by the loss of your loved one. You will then be able to make plans for the future. You will have come to the place where you can pick up the pieces and go on. The wound will heal though the scar remains.

The resolution of the loss of your loved one does not imply that you will no longer think of the deceased... rather it implies that you will have come to terms with and accepted your loss. It is a fulfillment of the Scripture which states - "A time to weep, and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance." The time of weeping and mourning will be over.

As you emerge from your bereavement you may discover that you are a stronger person than you were prior to the death of your loved one. You will quite likely have gained a deeper faith, along with increased sensitivity, and greater understanding and compassion for others.

*Source - Death and Dying: After Loss*

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