

## Grieving Loss

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Grief is a normal response experienced when something or someone important is lost. Thus, the death of a parent as well as the end of a relationship can cause grief.

We all come to the experience of loss with different experiences, traditions, and beliefs so may deal with loss in different ways. It is hard to know how best to respond to someone who is grieving a loss.

American culture often minimizes the time it takes to grieve, and encourages avoidance of talking about or experiencing the deep pain involved in significant loss. However, the avoidance of pain is like denying the pain from a broken bone. Not caring for the injury can result in further damage and lead from grief to depression.

### Things to expect when a loss has been experienced:

- Shock (numbness, feeling robotic, confusion, forgetfulness, loss of appetite, sleep disruption)
- Denial (fantasizing the deceased will return, feeling like it is a bad dream)
- Anger (directed at the deceased, at health care providers or others in positions of power, at a higher power, at oneself for not doing enough)
- Guilt (“I should have done more”; “I should have been more patient”)
- Sadness (little energy, crying, lack of interest in daily activities, emptiness, loneliness, hopelessness, despair)
- Physical symptoms (sleep disruption, appetite disturbances and weight fluctuations, low energy and fatigue, headaches, muscle aches, chest pain, racing heart, upset stomach or other digestive problems)
- Acceptance (time alone does not heal, one must acknowledge the loss and experience the pain of loss to be free to accept life without the loved one)
- Growth (suffering can lead to new compassion and sensitivity)

### Helping Someone Grieve

Do:

- Be physically and/or emotionally present
- Allow the person to be sad
- Reach out regularly—send a card, call, email, give a hug, offer practical help
- Be available after everyone else gets back to their own lives

- Acknowledge their pain, share your own
- Be a good listener (active listening) but do not give advice or try to make sense out of things (It is not helpful to hear “You are not given more burdens than you can bear...God needed her/him/them more than we did...s/he/they would want you to be strong...”)
- Ask what the person needs, how you can help, and ask this repeatedly
- Talk about the loss, using the name of the dead person
- Be patient, there are no shortcuts
- Encourage the person to take care of themselves (eating, sleeping, exercising)
- Remember significant days—anniversaries, holidays, activities that were special. Remember times of the day, week, month that are hard
- Suggest things to do together—gentle things that allow interaction, such as biking, walking, eating a meal together
- Acknowledge your limitations
- Get help for the person who is suicidal, depressed, or otherwise at-risk

Don't:

- Avoid the grieving person
- Avoid talking about the loss
- Ask questions about specific circumstances or details
- Offer advice or quick solutions
- Try to cheer the person
- Minimize the loss, or use clichés or easy answers
- Judge how a person feels or deals with their loss
- Encourage self-medicating through alcohol or drugs
- Be in a hurry for the person to get over it or put a timeline on their grief

Grieving is different from depression. Depression involves the absence of positive feelings and is different from the deep sorrow experienced at the loss of a loved one. Signs of depression include:

- Life seems meaningless and life is no longer pleasing or positive
- A sense of drowning in despair with no relief, loss of joy and laughter, little hope for or sense of the future
- Trouble sleeping, or sleeping most of the time

- Poor personal hygiene
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Inability to function in everyday life
- Persistent thoughts of suicide

It is important to remember that there is no timetable for grief. Grieving may well interfere with the concentration, energy, and focus needed to keep up with academics, work, and social connections.

For students experiencing a significant loss, it may be important to explore with the college what adjustments are necessary for them as they grieve. This could range from taking a few days off campus to attend a funeral, dropping a class if concentration is hard, or taking a term off. Several offices on campus can help you with this process, including:

Dean of Students Office  
Severance Hall, Suite 110  
507-222-4075

Student Health and Counseling  
Davis Hall, Lower Level  
507-222-4080

Chaplain's Office  
Skinner Memorial Chapel  
507-222-4003