

## Common Grief Reactions

People experience a variety of possible physical and emotional responses to losing someone. You may feel depressed, permanently exhausted or full of aches and pains. You will probably expect to feel sad, but in fact you may feel numb to begin with, void of any feeling. Your typical response to everything may be slow, automatic and cold. This is to do with being in shock.

Shock is usually associated with sudden death, but even when a death has long been expected, you may still experience shock when you hear the news. There are many practical arrangements to be made after someone dies. You may find yourself carrying out these tasks in a perfectly competent way, while feeling quite divorced from what is going on around you. You may even find it hard to cry. Because you are not breaking down, other people may assume that you are uncaring or stoical. Or they may tell you that you are coping well. Take no notice of such opinions. The shock may be a useful protection, which gets you through the first few days.

Some people may find it difficult to concentrate, to sort out priorities or even to order their thoughts. Tasks that are usually relatively simple to perform may become major obstacles or feel too difficult to handle. You may find yourself unable to cope with all the arrangements you need to make. Do allow willing helpers to support you through this.

A feeling of disbelief is a common and usually passing reaction to bereavement. It may be more likely among people who didn't get a chance to say goodbye, because they weren't there, or didn't see the body afterwards. If the death was sudden (because of a heart attack or a road traffic accident, for instance), it can naturally take longer to accept its reality.

Apart from feeling very weepy, people often become apathetic, withdrawn or very tired. They may have problems sleeping and lose their appetite. Although these physical effects and sensations may be frightening, they are not in themselves any cause for concern, provided that they don't go on for too long.

It's perfectly natural to feel relief, too, because someone's suffering is over, or because a long period of uncertainty has come to an end. It's also quite common to feel anxious. You may fear you'll be overwhelmed by grief or that you can't survive without the person you loved. You may become more aware of danger and of death, in general, and develop a much stronger sense of your own mortality. This can leave you feeling very insecure. Some people suffer from panic attacks, experiencing a rapid build-up of overpowering sensations, such as a pounding heart, faintness or shaky limbs, which make them, fear that they are going mad, will black out or are having a heart attack.

You may find that you feel very guilty, accusing yourself of all sorts of things. Sometimes people get stuck with regrets about things left undone; a sense of 'if only'. On the other hand, you may feel guilty because the death, following a long illness, has now relieved you of a burden that was hard to cope with. There is usually no need to feel guilty.

Grief often gives rise to anger. The bereaved person may feel very angry at the person who has died for leaving them and causing them such pain. They may feel unable to admit this to themselves, and instead become bitterly angry with someone else, for instance the health system, a family member, the Government or God. This is why it's so common for family feuds to start at funerals! We are encouraged to idealise the dead; it can be hard to admit how angry we are with them.

It's important to recognise that we are justified in feeling angry with anyone whose actions really contributed to the death. But we also need to acknowledge, sometimes, that the dead person was not perfect. We may have many reasons for being angry with them for things they did or didn't do in life. We also need to recognize that we can be angry with them just for dying, for leaving us to face life without them. It's not a comfortable feeling, and not rational. But it's a normal reaction.

After the funeral, people often realise how lonely they feel. That special person who made life meaningful and pleasurable, who made them feel good, has suddenly gone, and everything can feel hopeless and futile.

### **Recovery**

Whether we experience it or not, grief accompanies all the major changes in our lives. When we realise that we have grieved before and recovered, we see that we may recover this time as well. It is more natural to recover and go on living than to halt in the tracks of grief forever. When we expect to recover, and know it is possible, we set recovery as a goal to reach for. On the other hand, if we get caught up in the popular belief that the pain of loss is never-ending, we doom ourselves to feelings of hopelessness and continued sorrow.

Willingness to recover is essential. What it takes to recover is a willingness to hope, a willingness to go on with one's life, a willingness to let go of the pain, and a willingness to heal fully.