

*understanding
your
grief*

MATERIAL TO ASSIST IN YOUR JOURNEY
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I. Grief is unavoidable in loss

Grief is a natural response to loss and is unavoidable. It is normal to the human experience. However, healing through grief is optional, and unfortunately, too many people do not allow the grief process to do its healing wonders.

In order to accomplish this healing, a person should simply accept that grief is normal and unavoidable. Many people instead hang on to some myths that can block the healing process. As you read over the following common myths that many people believe, examine if they have intruded into your life in any way.

MYTH #1: PEOPLE ARE TO BE STRONG DURING GRIEF

One myth that too many people believe is that those who have faith should always be strong and not show any signs of struggling with the loss of a loved one. Grief is seen as a sign of weakness for those who believe that God expects us to be perfect. Quite to the contrary, giving our heartache to God builds a deeper, more intimate relationship with Him. Honest grieving, including sadness, anxiety, loneliness will cause your faith in God to grow and bring healing.

MYTH #2: PEOPLE SHOULD ALWAYS BE POSITIVE

Another harmful myth that many Christians believe is that believers should only express joy and positive emotions. Jesus Himself showed a whole range of emotions including weeping. He was “a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.” (Isaiah 53:3)

MYTH #3: GRIEF WILL GO AWAY IF YOU IGNORE IT

Another belief that interferes with grief is that we should not grieve; that God doesn't want us to grieve. While you may not hear it said, a lot of people think that we are to simply let go and move on quickly and then grief will simply go away. This is contrary to our God-given need to express our emotions. Failure to do this will often cause further stress.

MYTH #4: GOD IS ABSENT DURING GRIEF

Many who experience loss sense that God is not present. They ponder why God seems so close in times of prosperity, but so far away in times of trouble. Some who mourn feel deep loneliness. Yet, expressions of grief as a lamentation of the soul can bring a deeper awareness of God's constant presence.

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*To weep is to make less
the depth of grief.* WILLIAM
SHAKESPEARE

II. God has built us to handle grief

God has placed within each person a desire to move through a grief process – to move beyond these myths and other false beliefs to the fact that there is a built-in process, which allows those who experience real losses to move into grief and to eventually pass through it. This grieving process brings healing and full life once again.

While people can journey through this grief process in different ways, there are some common themes that are helpful for you to be aware of as someone dealing with loss.

GRIEF IS REAL AND PAINFUL

Grief comes because you have lost someone or something that you love and cherish. Therefore, it naturally hurts! You may have persistent headaches, feel listless, experience a loss of appetite, and have all kinds of emotions. Such responses are normal. This loss is real. It may feel overwhelming at times, with feelings of meaninglessness or lostness suddenly intruding on your life. It can be most helpful to express your pain to someone who is safe for you, to release your deeply felt sorrow with an understanding person.

GRIEF IS PERSONAL

No one experiences loss exactly as you do. Your situation and feelings are unique and personal. The depth of your relationship with the person/place lost, family situations, friends' reactions, health issues, and the time you had to prepare will all affect the impact on you. Only you know what it means to go through your grief experience. Be aware of this, but also be careful not to let this isolate you from others. Trusted friends and wise counsel can often assist you in your personal processing.

GRIEF IS DIRECTIONAL

The grief process has a built-in forward direction. It is purpose-driven to assist you through various stages that lead to healing. Like any process, it has a beginning point (the actual loss and separation), a series of stages, and an ending point (recovery and healing). As you face this grief and encounter the intensity that can come at various stages of the process, it is helpful to remember that you are on a journey, which will include some pain, but that will bring restoration and new life. Remember that you are involved in a healthy process.

*The friend who can stay with us
in an hour of grief, who can
tolerate not knowing, not healing,
not curing... that is a friend who
who cares*

HENRI NOUWEN

GRIEF TAKES TIME

Healing will happen, but it will be gradual. The grief process cannot be forced or hurried. There is no predetermined timetable for grief to run its course. Many people will begin to feel better in weeks or months. For others, the grieving process is measured in years. Even a good while after a loss, especially at special events such as holidays, anniversaries, and family events, you may likely sense sorrow and absence. Be patient with yourself and allow the process to unfold in a personal way. It will help you to keep in mind that the loss of what is important should and will take time (an average of six months to two years).

GRIEF IS GOOD

Grief is not easy or painless. Granger Westberg wrote a classic book titled *Good Grief*, which simply states another built-in aspect of grief that too many people neglect. Grief is good because it is a natural and healthy response to a significant personal loss. Grief calls your attention to the need to accept the reality of loss. It causes you to struggle to readjust your life. It leads you on a path of healing. Human life involves loss and, even though society may not help us deal with this, God wants to assist us in working our way through grief. God is a god of love and amazing grace that is available to help us through pain and sorrow. Engaging in the grief process, being confident that God is there with you, will naturally move you forward to a point where you accept your loss and begin to feel healing and find new life. Hope is at the foundation of a relationship with God. Lean into God's grace, presence and love, even if these seem unclear at times.

III. Grief moves through phases

Many people find that an understanding of the typical stages of grief helps them sort out their personal experience. The ribbon below traces the path of the grief process from the time loss is first experienced to the healing that eventually comes with a return to meaningful life.

While there are commonalities that people experience in grief, no two experiences are alike. Each person will experience loss and recovery in their own way, with the intensity varying according to their personality and situational factors. The process is also not as smooth as pictured. Grief is a messy process, with people often moving back and forth between stages over time.

It is helpful to view the grieving process as a roller coaster, full of ups and downs, with dramatic curves along with moments of calm before the next change. Your journey will likely be rougher in the beginning, with dips that come unexpectedly and seem to be deeper and longer. The difficult periods should become less intense and shorter as time goes by, as you get more accustomed to the journey. Remember that it takes time to work through any significant loss!

While there are differing opinions regarding details about the specific symptoms and stages of grief, the following list of four phases along with the more typical stages associated with each may be helpful as you seek to understand your personal experiences.



PHASE 1: INITIAL IMPACT

SHOCK

The sudden impact that someone valued has been lost comes on strong, often with the jolting effect of stunning news. This is a very physical stage as the body reacts to disbelief and loss, perhaps with feelings of emptiness, shortness of breath, shutting down and crying.

DENIAL AND NUMBNESS

Nature's anesthetic sets in causing numbness, with flat-feelings and staring into space. Denial is also common – "This can't be happening!" People describe themselves as feeling frozen inside and may wring their hands. People may appear to be doing better than they are. These first two stages can last for hours or days.

EMOTIONAL RELEASE

The flood of pure grief comes with crying or other outpourings of emotions. Pain and distress can bring volatile emotions. The reality of loss is very apparent, with a feeling of hopelessness. There is catharsis with weeping or anger, both public and in private. During this phase, find trusted people to provide practical assistance.

PHASE 2: STRUGGLE WITH THE PAIN

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS COME AND GO

Fatigue, nausea, aches and pains, empty feeling in the stomach, under or over eating, irregular heartbeat, and sleeplessness are among the many symptoms that can present themselves. Lots of rest and proper diet are helpful.

EMOTIONAL DISTRESS WITH BOUTS OF ANGER AND GUILT/SHAME

There can be strong feelings of resentment or anger over the loss, especially over injustice or the lack of preparation for the loss. In its lesser form, this comes out as irritation of not having control over the event and the frustration of not having choices. Shame and guilt can surface in thoughts and feelings around "if only," and not being able to say goodbye or having a sense of relief.

DISORGANISATION AND LONELINESS

The bereaved slowly begins to realise that the loved one is gone, and there is a searching for meaning within the loss. Some people have thoughts like, "Is this all real?" Others wake from sleep believing that the death of a loved one is just a dream. Disorganisation is noted by many during this phase and often there is a strong feeling of loneliness – "No one understands." Sharing your personal struggles with a safe person can be most helpful during this phase.

PHASE 3: FACING THE REALITY

VARIED FEELINGS INCLUDING DEPRESSION

Feelings will vary according to one's personality, the context and circumstances, but most people will have periods of loneliness, guilt about the loss, fear about the future, low energy, lack of interest in daily routines, and a desire to withdraw. Strong feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, and depression are not uncommon. As reality is faced, resentment and anger may come in different ways, such as blaming doctors, friends and even God.

STABBING PAINS AND SELECTIVE MEMORY

There is a longing for what was lost. Jarring, brief but intense pain and recollections come, sometimes at totally surprising moments. Certain events (good or bad) can be rehearsed over and over. Various ties with the lost person or item begin to be broken, while good memories are selected out to keep and cherish.

RESISTANCE TO RETURNING

There is a wavering about returning to usual activities. Re-entry into life can be troublesome and painful, so there is a resistance to this that has to be dealt with. There is often a questioning of previously held beliefs about people, God, and faith. Part of recovery from loss is through the path of re-examining life, relationships, priorities and faith.

PHASE 4: FINDING NEW LIFE

ACCEPTANCE OF THE LOSS AND MOMENTS OF JOY

Genuine acceptance of the reality is found as a slow but steady awareness of a future emerges. An emotional resurrection begins, along with a reaffirmation of life. Sorrow remains, but joy now occurs more frequently. Interest in life is fuller once again.

STRUGGLE WITH NEW ROUTINE

There is a gradual return to the basics of your life, with some uncertainty or a mechanical sense to routines. Sadness continues, but the length of these times is shortening. Work or play may still lack joy. There can be a new desire to tell your story but uncertainty about what is appropriate.

HOPE AND RELATIONSHIPS RETURN

As life is readjusted, hope comes through with a desire to dream again and to love deeply. New relationships and new patterns for life are discovered. However, there are still struggles at times, especially on special personal days and holidays.



IV. You can assist the grief process

In today's changing world, everyone faces various kinds of loss and grief on a regular basis. Usually we think of grief in relation to the death of a loved one, since this is the most painful grief. However, grief as an emotional and physical reaction comes to us when we have to face any significant loss. In our mobile society, people can experience a variety of losses including leaving family, moving to new places or housing, seeing a friend or work colleague move away, loss of health or stability, and certainly the biggest grief of all, the death of a loved one.

Grief can last longer than society and those around you recognise. Be patient with yourself, keeping your faith and life as active as possible. For some people the pain of the loss is so intense that it keeps them from resuming normal life. This is known as "complicated grief" and happens when a person has constant mourning and can't seem to get unstuck. If you are having trouble accepting the loss a long while after it has happened, to the point that daily routine and relationships are still disrupted, please consult with a pastor, counsellor, doctor or trusted person for assistance.

*Grief is the price
we pay for love.*

QUEEN ELIZABETH

AS YOU JOURNEY THROUGH YOUR OWN GRIEF EXPERIENCES, ESPECIALLY DURING TIMES OF MORE INTENSITY:

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- Talk about your grief, but don't obsess over it.
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- Be tolerant of your physical, emotional and interpersonal limits.
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- Get more rest, as grieving can take enormous energy.
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- Eliminate unnecessary stress as much as possible.
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- Draw comfort from your faith.
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- Make time to be with people who are good for you.
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- Consider a memorial page on Facebook.
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- Embrace and treasure your good memories.
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- Find ways to exercise and have meaningful activities.
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- Plan ahead for grief "triggers" during holidays and anniversaries.
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- Express your feelings in a creative way.
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- Renew the kind of resources that have worked for you in the past.
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- Lean heavy into the grace and love of God.

*The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*

PSALM 18:2

FOR WHATEVER FORM OF GRIEF YOU MAY BE EXPERIENCING ...

MAY THE GOD
OF ENCOURAGEMENT AND ENDURANCE
BE WITH YOU.