



Grief and Loss Helpcard – Overview

What is Grief?

Grief is....

- A normal response to the loss of a significant person, object or opportunity.
- The sum of all our emotions to a loss – not just our sadness.
- A series of reactions which may continue over a period of time.

Types of Loss

Loss threatens our sense of safety, mastery and control.

- Material:** Loss of significant material possessions or objects, e.g. home, inheritance, photo album, car etc.
- Relational:** Loss of significant relationship due to death, distance or unresolvable conflict, e.g. spouse, parent, friend.
- Functional:** Loss of ability to perform certain actions, e.g. unable to walk or speak clearly following a stroke.
- Role:** Loss of the part one may play in area of life, e.g. a person who loses their job due to redundancy.
- Intrapsychic:** Loss of dreams, hopes, unrealistic expectations, e.g. living happily ever after without conflict in a relationship.
- Systemic:** Loss felt when a significant system or routine changes, e.g. changes in rituals performed or music in church.

Reactions to Grief

Some of the common reactions to grief include...

- Physical:** Hollowness in stomach, tightness in chest or throat, muscle weakness, dry mouth, lack of energy.
- Emotional:** Sadness, anger, guilt, loneliness, fatigue, helplessness, shock, yearning, emancipation, relief, numbness.
- Behavioural:** Crying, sleep and appetite disturbances, absent mindedness, social withdrawal, searching or calling out, restless overactivity, avoiding reminders of the loss.
- Cognitive:** Disbelief, confusion, preoccupation, hallucinating.

Factors influencing the grieving process

The grieving process following the death of another person is usually more painful and severe when...

- There has been little or **no prior anticipation** of the death.
- The person who died was very close to the person who is grieving.
- The person has **no belief** that they will be re-united with the deceased in the afterlife.
- There is **little or no social support** for the grieving person.
- The person is struggling with many additional **life stressors**.
- The person does not feel permitted to **freely express the grief**.



Grief and Loss:

Do's and Don'ts of helping those who are grieving

Do...

Listen: Allow the person to speak of the situation and their grief for as long as they need to. Part of healing is being able to repeat discussions and reflections on the loss.

Permit the expression of feelings: The person is most helped when they are permitted to express what they are feeling in the moment. At times that will be tears and at other times it may even be joy or relief.

Reflect Feelings: Reflecting the feelings the person is expressing in any moment allows them to feel heard, cared for and valued.

Normalise reactions: Often grief reactions will cause the person to feel anxious, e.g. confusion or excessive crying. Letting them know that their response is common in times of grief may ease their anxiety.

Keep confidences: Remember that the story of the grieving person is their story to tell. Gain permission from the person before sharing any information with others.

Think before you speak: People who are grieving are usually overwhelmed and particularly sensitive to the words and actions of others. Be careful about the words used when caring for a grieving person, ensuring they won't cause greater pain for the person.

Don't...

Try to give reasons or answers: Often the grieving person will be asking why the death has happened. Avoid giving any answers around the purpose or reasons of death.

Fill the silences: Often the person won't want to speak and there will be many periods of silence. A time of grief is the best time to be a quiet, peaceful presence for another and not to force them to communicate.

Distract the grieving person: We often try to take the grieving person's mind off the grief because we feel uncomfortable with the grief. Not allowing the grieving person to feel their pain will only prolong the grieving process.

Judge: People deal with grief in a variety of ways and in different timeframes. Passing judgement on what you think person should or should not be feeling, thinking or doing during a period of grief, may cause them to feel hurt and add to their existent pain.

Stay away: Often everybody rallies around a person in support immediately following the death but that presence and support diminishes quickly as everyone moves on with their lives. It is important to keep in regular contact with the grieving person.