

Self-Care in the Midst of Grief

When you're grieving, it's more important than ever to take care of yourself. The stress of a major loss can quickly deplete your energy and emotional reserves. Looking after your physical and emotional needs will help you get through this difficult time.

- **Face your feelings.** You can try to suppress your grief, but you can't avoid it forever. In order to heal, you have to acknowledge the pain. Trying to avoid feelings of sadness and loss only prolongs the grieving process. Unresolved grief can also lead to complications such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and health problems.
- **Express your feelings in a tangible or creative way.** Write about your loss in a journal. If you've lost a loved one, write a letter saying the things you never got to say; make a scrapbook or photo album celebrating the person's life; or get involved in a cause or organization that was important to him or her.
- **Look after your physical health.** The mind and body are connected. When you feel good physically, you'll also feel better emotionally. Combat stress and fatigue by getting enough sleep, eating right, and exercising.
- **Don't let anyone tell you how to feel, and don't tell yourself how to feel either.** Your grief is your own, and no one else can tell you when it's time to "move on" or "get over it." Let yourself feel whatever you feel without embarrassment or judgment. It's okay to be angry, to yell at the heavens, to cry or not to cry. It's also okay to laugh, to find moments of joy, and to let go when you're ready.
- **Don't isolate.** During this time, although you may feel as if you want to be alone, try to temper your periods of being alone with being amongst people. If being in a group or crowd is too overwhelming, reach out to a single friend. Plan to spend time with others. Consider meeting up with others who knew the deceased person and share together.
- **Avoid using drugs or alcohol to cope.** Although the emotional pain may feel overwhelming at times, this is the time to express it. Medicating this mood with substances is a temporary fix that keeps you from fully processing the pain, sadness and anger your body is telling you to express. Using substances during this time is an added risk as people who are under the influence remain in grief, often lashing out at others, causing relational problems.

There are many resources available to help you:

- Call the Counseling Center at 907-4239 for an individual appointment
- Consider on-line resources that are available 24/7, such as www.grief.com; www.journeyofhearts.org; www.griefnet.org

Following the death of someone close to you, you may find yourself experiencing a variety of feelings. Sometimes referred to as the "Stages of Grief", these feelings often occur in a pattern or series for most people; however, grief can be a very individual experience. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Consider these stages:

1. SHOCK & DENIAL-

You will probably react to learning of the loss with numbed disbelief. You may deny the reality of the loss at some level, in order to avoid the pain. Shock provides emotional protection from being overwhelmed all at once. This may last for weeks. Shock is often greater when experienced in an unexpected death (e.g. accidental death).

2. ANGER-

Frustration gives way to anger, and you may lash out and lay unwarranted blame for the death on someone else. If you have a faith belief, you may seek answers from your Higher Power to help explain how this could happen. This is a time for the release of bottled up emotion. You may rail against fate, questioning "Why me?"

3. BARGAINING-

During this stage, you may attempt to regain control. While trying to move toward the reality of the loss, you may think of ways to try to "undo" the loss. Bargaining often sounds like a private conversation between you and the universe or a Higher Power, (e.g. "If I promise to be a better person, would you send him back to me?")

4. "DEPRESSION", SADNESS, LONELINESS-

Just when your friends may think you should be getting on with your life, a long period of sad reflection may hit you. This is a normal stage of grief, so do not be "talked out of it" by well-meaning outsiders. Encouragement from others is not helpful to you during this stage of grieving. Healthy coping mechanisms are vital at this time, keeping talking about your feelings. Avoid escapes like drugs and alcohol. Seek counseling if no one around you is willing to listen to your sadness.

5. ACCEPTANCE & HOPE-

During the last stage of this grief model, you learn to accept and deal with the reality of your situation. Acceptance does not necessarily mean instant happiness. Given the significance of the loss, you may be forever impacted. If you've experienced multiple losses, you may find acceptance easier. Even in acceptance, there may be times when you will return to earlier stages, feeling sad as you have memories, or feeling angry when the person isn't available. This is all part of normal grieving process. You will find joy again and you will be able to move on.