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wellbeing, ability, recovery

# BEREAVEMENT | GRIEF & LOSS COMPLICATIONS

All grief is complicated. We are in unknown territory, and trying to make sense both of circumstances and ourselves will not be easy.

The process can take a long time and certain circumstances can prolong and make it more difficult, for instance:

- The mourner may have unfinished business with the dead person
  - Unresolved quarrels with the deceased and loving words left unsaid
- The death may have been sudden and unexpected
- The person may be missing or there may have been no funeral
- We may feel guilty about our 'unfair' and 'disloyal' feelings, or about the relief and gratitude we felt when our loved one was finally free of pain
- The death may have been a suicide
- The death may have been of a child

The pain experienced at the loss of a loved one is composed of many intense emotions including sadness, despair, anger, guilt, fear, loneliness, shame, jealousy. When a person who is integral to one's life dies, there are other losses which also follow. Your immune system will reduce in its defences making you more prone to common illnesses. Existing illnesses may get worse and we may develop psychosomatic disorders.

The worst problems, however, will stem from the profound emotional impact. We need all our energy to cope with our own emotions and so may neglect or reject others. Anxiety attacks, chronic fatigue, depression, an obsession with the deceased, even suicidal feelings, are all common reactions to death. Unresolved quarrels with the deceased and loving words left unsaid come back to haunt us. Irrational anger (toward the loved one, their doctors, ourselves) can leave us exhausted and afraid. We feel guilty about our 'unfair' and 'disloyal' feelings, or about the relief and gratitude we felt when our loved one was finally free of pain. People are unprepared for the intensity of these emotions or the swiftness with which moods change. It is hard for them to believe that these are normal and common reactions to a loss. They may even begin to doubt their sanity.

Initially, these painful feelings may be omnipresent. Eventually they become more periodic, surfacing at unexpected and expected times during the day. Their unpredictable nature can create a sense of being out of control and often they leave the sufferer with the experience of being on an 'emotional rollercoaster.' Eventually they become less frequent and may become intense mostly during anniversaries, holidays, and special events.

A **loss to suicide** can be one of the most difficult to bear. The burdens of guilt, anger and shame are great. Survivors feel 'responsible' for the death and vulnerable to the judgements of others. Survivors of a suicide may need professional help (preferably as a family unit, and especially during the first weeks) to help them face their terrible experience.

The **death of a child** is another kind of a loss that hits particularly hard. A child's death arouses an overwhelming sense of injustice – for lost potential, unfulfilled dreams. Parents feel responsible, however irrational this may be.



**Elderly people** are especially vulnerable to the stress of bereavement. For them, to lose a spouse is to lose a lifetime of shared experiences. With close friends dying too, their circle may shrink alarmingly fast.

**Bereaved children** can suffer terribly. The loss of a parent may affect their sense of security and survival. Attempts to protect them from death, or from their parent's display of grief, may add to their distress because of the confusing changes they see in the adults around them. Limited understanding and an inability to express their feelings puts very young children at a special disadvantage. They may regress (to bed-wetting for example); may ask insensitive questions about the dead person; they may invent games about dying or pretend that the death never happened. Coping with a child's grief puts an additional strain on a bereaved parent. But explosions of anger or criticism will only deepen a child's anxiety and delay recovery.

The major life changes that death brings, precipitates other pressures, and involves decision-making at a time when emotional defences are low and judgement is poor. Losing a spouse involves major social adjustments: financial crisis complicates normal grieving patterns; being 'single again' in a couple-oriented society, acting as both parents to children, learning new skills; perhaps re-joining the workforce.

Though bereavement and grief are painful experiences, they are an integral part of life. We may feel at the time that we will never get over it, but most people do. Learning to live with a loss is like the body's adjustment to a wound. We form a scar and it gradually diminishes.

It never quite fades away, but we learn to 'live around it'.





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