
Recovering from Loss

Loss is a natural part of the human experience. The process can be overwhelming and difficult. There is hope though. Use the strategies and information below to help in identifying, accepting, and recovering from a personal loss.

Kinds of Losses

Loss comes in many forms. It can include loss of:

- A person through death
- Family structure through divorce
- A pet
- A job
- Your good health when you are diagnosed with a disease
- A body part through accident or surgery
- Physical ability, such as when blindness occurs
- A friend when he/she moves away

The range of feelings experienced by grieving people can vary greatly. Some experience a heightened sense of urgency while others may feel the need to slow down and contemplate the situation. Although reactions may differ, the feelings experienced from loss are all valid. Emotional reactions to loss may include the following:

- Sadness
- Shock ("This can't be happening to me!")
- Denial ("It's not true!" "I don't believe it's real!")
- Anger and rage ("How dare she leave me?" "God doesn't care!")
- Guilt ("It's all my fault.")
- Relief ("He doesn't have to suffer any more.")
- Fear, anxiety and panic ("How will I live without...?")
- Hopelessness ("This pain will never get any better.")
- Fatigue
- Sleep problems (too much, too little, or early-morning waking)
- Increase in alcohol and prescription drug use (often in an attempt to sleep)
- Inability to concentrate
- Withdrawal from social activities
- Weight loss or weight gain

Recover From Loss by Taking Care of Yourself

Self-care is a very important part of "grief relief". Some of the ways bereaved individuals can take care of themselves include the following:

Get support. There are all kinds of support. One person may want to spend an afternoon talking about his/her absent loved one. This may include reminiscing, and/or looking at photos. Another person may find comfort in creating a small memorial of some kind. For someone else, support may include cooking a good meal together and avoiding all talk of the deceased.

Maintain good nutrition. When we're feeling down, it's easy to eat poorly or skip meals altogether. This can exacerbate the fatigue that is common in grief, disrupting sleep patterns, ability to exercise, and more. Good nutrition contributes to an overall sense of well-being.

Exercise. While it may be true that there is no quick cure for grief, exercise is a way for bereaved people to regain a sense of strength and control during an experience that feels out of their control. In addition, exercise is known to ease feelings of depression. (Be sure not to overdo it, and talk with your doctor before starting a new exercise routine.)

Avoid the use of alcohol and drugs. The numbing of feelings through the use of alcohol and drugs only prolongs the resolution of grief. Many drugs have depressive effects, which make the period of bereavement worse, not better. If you are not sleeping, consult a physician.

Take it easy. Losing a loved one can be one of life's most painful experiences. Do not expect too much of yourself during this difficult time. People who are mourning need time alone as well as time with others. Surround yourself with those who are patient and understanding. Avoid overextending yourself or adding on too many new responsibilities. Don't allow the feeling of "I should be doing..." to overtake the time you really need to recover.

Maintain rituals (or make new ones). Bring flowers to the grave site. Create a memory box devoted to the person that you can look at and put away as you wish. If it's not uncomfortable, continue to celebrate holidays or take a Sunday drive just as you always did when the person was present. Find new ways to increase your well-being. This may include writing a couple of pages in a daily journal or enrolling in a class.

Beyond Self: More Ways to Heal

Here are some more helpful ideas for when one is grieving:

- No one can tell you how to grieve. You are responsible for your own grieving process. There is no time limit. It is hard work and only you can manage the process for yourself.
- After a major loss, don't make any important decisions until your life feels more balanced. It can be tempting to make some hasty and important changes right after a major loss as an effort to feel more in control. The grieving process has a purpose. It is to help you learn to accept the reality of the loss and to learn from the experience.
- Remind yourself that your grief will end. You will not feel like this forever. You will heal. Be vigilant about your health. Grieving can be extremely stressful and exhausting.
- Be careful with food and drink. While it may be tempting to numb the pain with food and alcohol, doing so can lead to the additional problems of substance abuse and obesity. Also, numbing the pain means that you prolong the denial, prolonging the grieving process.
- Talk about the person who is no longer in your life. People sometimes avoid talking about the loss as a denial mechanism causing a longer mourning period.
- Take time to be alone. In the days and weeks following the loss of a loved one, there is often a flurry of activity. There may be many visitors and telephone calls. This can be quite exhausting. People will understand if you don't answer the phone, go to your room and close the door for a while.
- Maintain a normal routine if you can. You have enough changes in your life right now. Try to get up, go to bed, and take your meals at the same times that you always do.
- Ask for help. You will need it. If you don't want to be alone or if you want someone to take you somewhere, it is okay to ask. People don't expect you to be self-sufficient right now.
- Let people help you. People want to help because it gives them a way to express their feelings. Staying connected with people is especially important now. Accepting help is a way of staying connected.
- Keep a journal. During the grieving process, try to write about your feelings rather than keeping your feelings inside. This exercise also gives you something to remember and review in the future.

- Don't hurry your grief process. People sometimes want to put their feelings and memories behind them because they are painful. But grieving takes time, and there are no shortcuts.
- Remind yourself that although grief hurts, it will not harm you. Grief is painful, but you will survive and even grow from the experience.
- Expect to regress from time to time in your recovery process. This is normal. It may happen unexpectedly but probably won't last long.
- Acknowledge the anniversary of your loss. Take the day off or do something special. Have supportive people ready to be with you. It could be a difficult day, and it's better not to be alone.

This is a difficult time for all concerned. Family, friends, co-workers, and employers all want to help in recovering from a loss. Your Employee Assistance Program provides free confidential, short-term counseling that is prepaid by your employer and offered as a benefit to support your well-being.