

Guide to Loss

61 tips on the
experience of Grief and
how to help people
through it



The Grief Recovery Method®

by The Grief Recovery Institute®

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What is grief?

Grief is the normal and natural reaction to significant emotional loss of any kind.

Grief is the conflicting feelings caused by the end of, or change in, a familiar pattern of behaviour.

Grief is the feeling of reaching out for someone who has always been there, only to find when you need them one more time, they are no longer there.

Typical responses associated with grief:

Reduced concentration

A sense of numbness

Disrupted sleeping patterns

Changed eating habits

Roller coaster of emotional energy

There are over 43 losses that are considered to invoke grief. Some examples include:

Death

Divorce

Retirement

Moving

Pet Loss

Financial change

Loss of health

Legal Problems

Empty nest

End of Addiction

Starting School

Redundancy

Some examples of intangible losses that lead to grief:

Loss of trust

Loss of innocence

Loss of safety

Loss of childhood

Loss of control

Loss of faith

Loss of fertility

Grief is individual and unique

There are no stages. Grief cannot be neatly categorised. Elizabeth Kubler Ross' work was on Death & Dying not grief. She is very specific about this distinction in her books and yet the media and the universities have attached her work to grief. This common misinformation has confused and hurt many grieverers throughout the years.

There are no absolutes in grief.

There are no reactions so universal that all or even most people will experience them.

Grief is normal and natural. It is not a pathological condition nor a personality disorder.

Grief is often mislabelled as ADHD, Depression, PTSD and many other pathological conditions.

If you misdiagnose you will mistreat. These mislabelled grieverers are often incorrectly put on various medications, which will get in the way of recovering from loss.

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How do I know if I, or someone I know, is incomplete with a loss?

If you are unwilling to think about or talk about someone who has died or express feelings about any other losses.

If fond memories turn painful, you may be experiencing unresolved grief.

If you want only to talk about the positive aspects of the relationship, you may be incomplete.

If you want only to talk about the negative aspects of the relationship, you may be incomplete.

Unresolved grief maybe at the root of any fear associated with the thoughts or feelings about a relationship.

The impact of unresolved grief in society:

The following statistics are heart breaking and could be avoided in many cases.

Over half a million people die in the UK every year with an average of 5 griever per death. That's 2.5 million new grievers each year due to a death.

Over 250,000 griever per year due to divorce. This figure does not include the children grieving this significant loss.

25% of children in the UK are in single parent families¹.

By the 10th anniversary of moving in together just under 4 in ten couples will have separated.²

A Harvard study³ has found that when a husband or wife dies, the remaining spouse's risk of dying is 66 per cent higher in the three months after their partner's death.

Unresolved grief is cumulative and cumulatively negative

Unresolved grief is everywhere:

Mental health professionals we work with have found that although their clients come to them with another presenting issue, almost all of them have unresolved grief as the underlying problem.

An incomplete past may doom the future.

We find that many people alter life choices after a series of unresolved losses. This is done to protect themselves from further heartbreak. Usually this translates to living a guarded life and a reluctance to participate fully in relationships or new endeavours.

Grief is not clinical depression

A study⁴ of 8800 US mental health clients established that a large percentage of people diagnosed as depressed and placed on anti-depressant drugs are not clinically depressed. They are actually experiencing unresolved grief due to prior losses in their lives.

There are similar symptoms in grief as to depression: difficulty concentrating, roller coaster of emotions, sense of numbness, disrupted sleeping patterns, altered eating habits and massive loss of energy.

Short Term Energy Relieving Behaviours

Many people in our society use what we call “STERBS” or Short Term Energy Relieving Behaviours in an attempt to cover the feelings created by unresolved grief. Some examples of these behaviours would be drinking, over/under eating, gambling, smoking, over/under exercising, cleaning and many more.

The most common misinformation of the topic of Grief:

Time Heals.

Time does not heal. Time is an abstract concept – a unit of measurement that has no healing power. We know people who have waited 10, 30 or 40 or more years to feel better. However actions taken over time can heal.

Grieve Alone.

Often this advice is subtly implied “just give her some space” or “he needs a few minutes alone in the other room”. As children we learn that this means sad feelings should be hidden or experienced alone.

Be strong

Usually the griever is asked to be strong for others. “You have to be strong for your wife/Mum/children”

Don't feel sad.

This is usually followed by an intellectually true statement that is emotionally useless to the griever. “Don't feel sad, his suffering is over” or “Don't cry, at least you had him for 20 years”

Replace the loss

This is really common with pet loss or the end of a romantic relationship. “We'll get you a new dog” or “there's plenty more fish in the sea”

Keep busy

“If I just keep busy I won't have to think about the loss” This one is sad because some people spend their whole lives with this mentality and never get the chance to grieve and complete what was unfinished with the particular loss.

Common complaints expressed by grievers

A survey asked grievers to decide which comments were helpful following a loss. Out of 141 comments they found only 19 helpful. Here are some of the comments that were not helpful:

I know how you feel

You'll be fine in time

You shouldn't be feeling that way still

Look on the bright side at least they're in a better place

Don't feel bad his suffering is over

Don't be angry with God

You're young you can still have other children

It was just a dog/cat/bird etc

Helpful things to say to someone grieving a loss:

I can't imagine how you feel

I can't imagine how painful/devastating/heart-breaking this has been for you

There are no words, I don't know what to say.

Do listen with your heart, not your head. Allow them to express emotions with no judgment, criticism analysis or comparison.

Do ask "what happened?" in order to give them the chance to talk. Most people will avoid this question. Do not be tempted to try to fix them – simply listen.

Do go out of your way to talk to them. Grievors often feel isolated as people avoid them for fear of saying the wrong thing so they end up very alone.

Stay in the moment – to do this you may find it helpful to follow the words in your head. If your mind wanders they will know and you will have become unsafe.

Be empathetic. This means that if you tear up during their story let that be ok. You're allowed to be a human being while listening to another human being.

The G word – Guilty.

This might help you as the word "guilty" is often used by a griever:

Griever: my son died alone, I feel so guilty.

Grief Recovery Specialist: Did you ever do anything with intent to harm your son?

Griever: No, of course not (This is an almost universal response)

Grief Recovery Specialist: the dictionary definition of guilt is "intent to harm" and you didn't do that. You are devastated enough by his death, please don't add to it with an incorrect word that distorts your feelings. Would it be more accurate to say there are things you wish had been different, or better or that you'd done more of?

Griever: Oh yes!



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What does Recovery mean?

Recovery from loss is achieved by a series of small and correct choices made by the griever.

Sadly most of us have not been given the necessary information with which to make correct choices in response to a loss.

Recovery means feeling better.

Recovery is finding new meaning for living, without the fear of being hurt again.

Recovery is being able to enjoy fond memories without having them turn painful.

Recovery is acknowledging that it is perfectly alright to feel sad from time to time and to talk about those feelings no matter how those around you react.

Recovery means acquiring the skills we should have been taught as a child. These skills allow us to deal with loss directly.

Recovering from significant emotional loss is not an easy task. Taking the actions that lead to recovery will require your open mindedness, willingness and courage.

References

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