

# Grief is not a sign of *weakness*

Grief is not a sign of weakness. It is a healthy and fitting response to a loss; a tribute to one who has died. Running away from grief postpones sorrow; clinging to grief prolongs pain. Neither approach leads to healing. Allow grief to have its way for a while; then gradually and gently, you can release yourself from its grip. Recognition of the appropriateness and value of grief is the first step in accepting the reality of the loss. The acceptance is the first sign of recovery.

Each of us is different, but for most people grieving follows a pattern, proceeds through stages. We do not all experience every phase. Nor do we all move through grief at the same pace or with equal intensity. The following characteristics constitute the basic elements of the grief experience. Reviewing them might help you to identify your own pattern, determine where you are in the process and anticipate what you have yet to go through.

**SHOCK** A period of numbness usually follows the event of death. One feels stunned, or live in a trance. Shock could last only minutes, or persist for days or even longer. The stage of shock allows a person time to absorb what has happened and to begin to adjust. People sometimes use alcohol, tranquilizers, or other methods to cope during this period. There's also a tendency to leave decision-making to others. Yet, it is important to face the reality of the death and to regain control and direction of one's life.

**EMOTIONAL UPHEAVAL** As shock wears off, grief gives rise to a variety of emotions. When such feelings seem overwhelming, we do well to defer major decisions. Our family or counselors can help us interpret and deal with these feelings. As we come to understand what we experience, we can find appropriate ways to vent our emotions and to channel them to our advantage.

**PHYSICAL DISTRESS** The mental and emotional upset of a loss can cause physical distress and make us vulnerable to illness. Grief sometimes causes us to neglect healthy nourishment and exercise or to over indulge ourselves in drinking, smoking, or medication. We might need a professional's advice in regard to our symptoms, their causes, and their treatment.

**PANIC** A death can often make the future seem uncertain. We might panic in the face of the unknown. Panic prevents concentration and defers acceptance of the finality of death. It tempts us to run from life, to avoid, and refuse to try. Patience with ourselves and a willingness to accept help from others will enable us to subdue panic and outgrow its confusion.

**GUILT** Many people fault or blame themselves in the event of a death. We have all made mistakes, and sincere regret is the best response if a mistake has been made. However, unwarranted self-reproach can impact our mental health and impede our recovery from our grief. Since guilt is a common manifestation, help from family, friends, or the EAP may be needed to help us gain a better perspective and to aid us in dealing with guilt feelings, whether justified or exaggerated.

**HOSTILITY** People in grief naturally ask "Why?", "Why him?", "Why now?" and "Why like this?". Most of these questions have no answer. The resulting frustration causes us to feel resentment and anger. We want someone to blame. If we can accept the lack of answers to "Why?", we might begin to ask, instead, what we can do not to grow through what has happened. It is then we have started to move beyond anger and towards hope.

**AIMLESSNESS** At time in the grieving process, a kind of drifting occurs. Mourners find it difficult to return to familiar, even necessary, activities. Once we can begin to assess our potential for the future we will be able to move ahead in the process.

**DEPRESSION** Grievers, typically, but in varying degrees, experience loneliness and depression. This pain too, will pass. Reaching out to others is a key way to lessen loneliness and overcome depression.

**HOPE** In time and with effort, hope grows. We can express emotions without embarrassment or apology. We can feel concerned for ourselves and others. We can also maintain interest in our jobs. We can make decisions and assume responsibility for ourselves. The example of others who have experienced a similar loss can serve as resources and a sign of hope.

