



Heart of the Redwoods  
COMMUNITY HOSPICE

GRIEF HANDBOOK

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## Most People Who suffer a Loss Experience One or More of the Following:

Feel tightness in the throat or heaviness in the chest.

Have an empty feeling in the stomach and lose their appetite or conversely, want to snack often.

Feel guilty at times and angry at other times.

Sense the loved one's presence, and talk to him or her.

Feel restless and look for activity but find it difficult to concentrate.

Feel as though the loss isn't real, and expect to see the one who died.

Wander aimlessly, forget things often, and don't finish the things they've started.

Have difficulty sleeping and feel exhausted.

Experience an intense preoccupation with the life of the deceased.

Dream of the loved one frequently, or want to.

Assume mannerisms or traits of their loved one.

Feel guilty or angry over things that happened or didn't happen in the relationship.

Feel intensely angry at the loved one for dying and leaving them.

Play and replay the memories of the last days/weeks/hours.

Lose all memory of the first days/weeks/hours after knowing of the death.

Feel as though they need to take care of other people who seem uncomfortable around them by politely not talking about their loss.

Need to tell and retell stories of the relationship and the loss.

Feel their mood changes over the slightest things.

Cry at unexpected times.

***These are all natural and normal grief responses***

## ***Helping Yourself in Times of Grief***

**Seek and Accept Support.** You need acceptance and caring throughout. If you lack support, make finding it your first goal. Start with family, friends or clergy...or call a local hospice office or counselor for advice.

**Accept Your Grief.** Time alone does not heal grief. To work through it you must accept and deal with it. Remember it is a natural healing process. Roll with its tides.

**Find Models.** You may need evidence that survival and growth are possible. Look for someone who can give you this hope. Books and support groups may be good places to begin.

**Learn About Grief.** Many a person who has learned about grief has declared "I found out I'm not crazy - I'm grieving". Understanding grief can make it feel safer and more predictable.

**Express It.** Without expression grief can leave you frozen and stoic. Find someone who can listen to your story - again and again. You may also want to express it privately - through music, art, poetry or a journal.

**Accept Your Feelings.** Grief has many feelings - some very intense. Accept them and they will help you learn about yourself and the meaning of your loss. Lock them up inside you and you will lock away parts of yourself.

**Pace Yourself.** Grief takes energy. You may tire easily. A slower pace alternated with periods of diversion and mild exercise will maximize healing. So will good nutrition.

**Involve Yourself in Work or Meaningful Activity.** It can help you to maintain direction, control, and purpose, and occupy your mind.

**Don't Be Afraid to Have Fun.** Laughter is good medicine. Allow yourself opportunities for diversion and freshness. Children and pets can be great providers of healing.

**Hitch Your Wagon to a Star.** You've got to have hope. Faith is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to go on when fear is present. Healing will come eventually.

# The Grieving Person's Bill of Rights

You are the one who is grieving and, as such, you have certain 'rights' no one should try to take away from you. The following list is intended both to empower you to heal and to help you decide how others can and cannot help. This is not to discourage you from reaching out to others for help, but rather to assist you in distinguishing useful responses from hurtful ones.

**1. You have the right to experience your own unique grief.** No one else will grieve in exactly the same way you do. When you turn to others for help, don't allow them to tell you what you should or should not be feeling.

**2. You have the right to talk about your grief.** Talking about your grief will help you heal. Seek out others who will allow you to talk as much as you want, as often as you want about your grief.

**3. You have the right to feel a multitude of emotions.** Confusion, disorientation, fear, guilt and relief are just a few of the emotions you might feel as part of your grief journey. Others may try to tell you that feeling angry, for example, is wrong. Don't take these judgmental responses to heart. Instead, find listeners who will accept your feelings without condition.

**4. You have the right to be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits.** Your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you feeling fatigued. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Get daily rest. Eat balanced meals. And don't allow others to push you into doing things you don't feel ready to do.

**5. You have the right to experience grief "attacks".** Sometimes, out of nowhere, a powerful surge of grief may overcome you. This can be frightening, but is normal and natural. Find someone who understands and will let you talk it out.

**6. You have the right to make use of ritual.** The funeral ritual does more than acknowledge the death of someone loved. It helps provide you with the support of caring people. More important, the funeral is a way for you to mourn. If others tell you that rituals such as these are silly or unnecessary, don't listen.

**7. You have the right to embrace your spirituality.** If faith is a part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. Allow yourself to be around people who understand and support your religious beliefs. If you feel angry at God find someone to talk with who won't be critical of your feelings of hurt and abandonment.

**8. You have the right to search for meaning.** You may find yourself asking "Why did he or she die? Why this way? Why now?" Some of your questions may have answers, but some may not. And watch out for the cliched responses some people may give you. Comments like "It was God's will" or "Think of what you have to be thankful for" are not helpful and you do not have to accept them.

**9. You have the right to treasure your memories.** Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of someone loved. You will always remember. Instead of ignoring your memories, find others with whom you can share them.

**10. You have the right to move toward your grief and heal.** Reconciling your grief will not happen quickly. Remember, grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself and avoid people who are impatient and intolerant with you. Neither you nor those around you must forget that the death of someone you love changes your life forever.

from "How to Start and Lead a Bereavement Support Group", by Alan D. Wolfelt PhD

# WHAT DO YOU NEED DURING GRIEF?

## TIME

Time alone and time with others whom you trust and who will listen when you need to talk.. Months and years of time to feel and understand the feelings that go along with loss.

## REST

Relaxation, exercise, nourishment, diversion. You may need *extra* amounts of things you needed before. Hot baths, afternoon naps, a trip, a cause to work for to help others. Any of these may give you a lift. Grief is an exhausting process emotionally. You may need to replenish yourself. Follow what feels healing to you and what connects you to the people and things you love.

## SECURITY

Try to reduce or find help for financial or other stresses in your life. Allow yourself to be close to those you trust. Getting back into routine helps. You will need to allow yourself to do things at your own pace.

## HOPE

You may find hope and comfort from those who have experienced a similar loss. Knowing some things that helped them, and realizing that they have recovered, and that time *does* help may give you hope that some time in the future your grief will be less raw and painful.

## CARING

Try to allow yourself to accept the expressions of caring from others even though they may be uneasy and awkward. Helping a friend or close relative also suffering the same loss may bring a feeling of closeness with that person.

## GOALS

For a while it may seem that much of life is without meaning. At times like these, small goals are helpful. Something to look forward to, like visiting with a friend next week, a movie tomorrow night, a trip next month, helps you get through the time in the immediate future. Living one day at a time is a rule of thumb. At first, don't be surprised if your enjoyment of these things isn't the same. This is normal. As time passes you may need to work on some longer range goals to give some structure and direction to your life. You may need guidance or counseling to help with this.

## SMALL PLEASURES

Do not underestimate the healing effects of small pleasures, as you become ready. Sunsets, a walk in the woods, a favorite food, all are small steps toward regaining your pleasure in life itself.

## PERMISSION TO BACKSLIDE

Sometimes after a period of feeling good, we find ourselves back in the old feelings of extreme sadness, despair, or anger. This is often the nature of grief, up and down, and it may happen over and over for a time. It happens because as humans we cannot take in all of the pain and the meaning of death at once. So we let it in a little at a time.

***THE ONLY WAY OUT IS THROUGH***

## **This is a Really Normal Grief**

**Sadness** Crying, a deep sense of unhappiness and loss, feelings of hopelessness or depression which may come and go unpredictably.

**Anger** You may have feelings ranging from mild frustration to rage. They could be directed toward the person who died, medical people, or others who were involved in the life or death of your loved one. Even anger towards God is a normal response to loss and doesn't mean your faith is flawed.

**Guilt and Self-reproach** It is very common to feel that there was something else that should or could have been done to change the way things turned out. It is also common to feel that there was something that you should have said or done to complete the final good-bye.

**Anxiety** You may experience passing and temporary senses of instability and unknown danger, or even strong attacks of panic and an impulse to run. This is a normal grief reaction.

**Loneliness** You may feel lonely even in the company of your best friends, or in environments which are familiar to you. Church, club, social gatherings, you somehow feel an outsider, that you don't belong anymore. This is a common reaction to bereavement. Be confident that as your new identity evolves, the loneliness will be dispelled as the environment of your new identity takes form.

**Fatigue** You may feel that life takes too much energy. You may wish to sleep longer than you usually do, or you may find that you can't stay awake in the middle of the day; that you are drowsy or nap a lot. This is also a natural grief reaction.

**Helplessness** Often bereavement requires that we take on responsibilities which we have never experienced before. This can make us feel helpless and inadequate, even challenge our self esteem; “I can’t survive without him/her”, or “I’m not capable without him/her.”

**Yearning** A normal response to bereavement is a longing that the loved one will return and life will resume as normal. You may long for the nightmare to end and the emptiness to be filled, or feel an unquenchable desire for the absent loved ones presence.

**Euphoria** Sometimes there will be a sense of a high or uplifted feeling following the death of a loved one, especially if there has been a long illness, or if there was an unhappy relationship with the deceased. This feeling may bring mixed and confusing feelings which will require time to sort through.

**Relief** Following the anticipated death of a loved one, especially if you were the primary care giver, you may experience a sense of relief. This may be confusing and guilt laden - how can you feel relief if you loved the person who died? It will take time to sort out the emotions.

**Numbness** The sense of having been drugged, anesthetized or out of it is a normal grief reaction. The feeling of being in a fog, or mechanically plodding along, is a normal feeling following the death of someone close. Many bereaved persons feel that they are on “auto-pilot” for weeks, even months, following the death of their loved one.

**Confusion** Often there will be periods of disorientation, as though the universe shifted on its axis. A sense of lost time, or not being in touch with what is going on around oneself is a very normal reaction to bereavement. “Who am I, what’s going on, how did I get here, how did this happen?”

# **COPING STRATEGIES THAT WORK**

## **Helpful Attitudes**

Be gentle with yourself. Avoid harsh judgments.

Be aware of your body's need for nutrition and rest.

Let the natural healing process of time work--don't try to hurry things.

Honor the messages your body gives you. Unexpressed words or tears can cause lumps in our throats: anger held inside can cause a headache or upset stomach.

Expect the world around you to be filled with land mines--moments of painful realization of your loss and resentment toward a world that seem to go on without noticing or caring.

## **Helpful Actions**

Schedule time to spend with family and friends to counter feelings of isolation

Find a supportive, trustworthy friend and talk about your feelings honestly.

See a physician if new or unusual symptoms arise.

Maintain a regular schedule but take things a bit more slowly than usual. Avoid unrealistic goals and expectations, cutting back on non-essential activities to conserve strength and energy.

If you have the motivation, volunteer to help those in need, but only if it doesn't deplete you or make you feel worse.

Seek counseling if reactions are overwhelming or persistent.

Give yourself time for healing. Allow yourself time to focus on your loss and time to escape feelings of pain.

Find ways to honor your loved one's memory...go to a special place, light a candle, plant a tree.

Write in a journal or draw pictures about your feelings of loss and grief. Write a letter to your loved one.

Remind yourself that feelings will pass.

## **When Problem Solving**

Gather information.

Make a plan of action and follow it.

Take one step at a time.

Talk with a professional.

Talk with friends you have learned to trust.

Draw from past experience.

## **COPING STRATEGIES THAT *DON'T* WORK**

### **Avoidance**

Keeping feelings to yourself

Eating more or less than is healthy

Drinking more

Smoking more

Taking unprescribed medication or drugs

Avoiding other people

Lashing out

### **Rumination**

Brooding about how alone you feel

Repeatedly thinking about why you react the way you do, why you are the way you are, why you don't feel like doing.....

Analyzing your personality

Fretting over what other people do

Repeatedly thinking harsh, judgmental thoughts toward yourself or others; harboring hatred or resentment, seeking revenge

### **Remember**

***As a person facing grief, you may feel isolated. People may avoid you or say things that annoy or hurt you. You do not have to make it better for the world. Focus on taking care of yourself.***