

Bereavement

When a loved one dies, the bereaved person invariably goes through a predictable human process of grieving.

The extent of the reaction will depend on circumstances such as the suddenness and unexpectedness of the death. It will depend also on the age of the deceased and the bereaved, and other factors such as personal, family, national or religious customs and habits. However, no matter what the circumstances, the bereaved will suffer a reaction and the emotions described here are regarded as normal responses.

The first stage

'Shock' or disbelief

The immediate reaction is for you to simply feel numb and empty. For a short time you may feel and behave almost as though nothing has happened—everything is a blur—but eventually extreme grief may take over. During this first stage, delusions of seeing or speaking with the dead person may occur: although this may disturb you, the experiences are normal. There is also a tendency to forget that the person is dead and act as though he or she were alive. You will find it difficult to concentrate and may give vent to spontaneous emotions such as crying, screaming or even laughing.

The second stage

Grief and despair

At this stage the loss of your loved one will really hit you. This sense of loss is reinforced by loneliness, by constant reminders of lost habits and experiences, and by the clothes and other personal effects left behind. You will feel intensely sad and lonely. Friends and acquaintances will not visit you so much now and, in fact, many will feel uncomfortable and embarrassed about approaching you. It is important that you understand this problem. You may actually feel like withdrawing from people.

The sense of presence of the deceased will continue. Two common feelings, anger and guilt, will also surface.

Anger

This may include anger towards those considered responsible for the death and even at the deceased for dying. Your resentfulness may include blaming and accusing the medical attendants of neglect. You will feel like talking a lot about your loved one, and you will probably recall all the vivid memories leading up to the death and constantly churn them over in your mind. Common recurring thoughts include:

- 'Why did it happen to me?'
- 'If only "so and so" had been done, it would be different.'

Guilt and self-blame

You may feel guilty because you did not do more for the person or take more notice of him or her. Such guilt feelings

and intense grief are commoner when the death is unexpected. It is important that you do not feel too badly about any apparent neglect on your part—the 'if only I had' feeling.

The feeling of intense grief usually lasts about 6 weeks and the second stage of grief for about 6 months, but it can resurface every now and then over the next few years. During the last 4 months or so of this stage you will feel sad and helpless, then pass into a state of apathy and depression (the third stage).

The third stage

Adaptation or acceptance

After about 6 months you will begin to accept your severe loss. You develop a change in living habits by taking up new roles and activities. You can face up better to disposing of personal effects, establishing new relationships and attending to financial arrangements.

This phase takes a year or so and requires considerable understanding by all concerned. However, the feelings of apathy and depression can be a problem. Physical illness is common and includes problems such as insomnia, wheezing, diarrhoea and stomach pains. It is important to consult your doctor about any worrying physical or mental problems. Despite this, you will adapt and eventually learn to cope.

Self-help

First, you must realise that it is normal to pass through these stages of grieving, and so you cannot fight it. A bereaved person should always try to acknowledge his or her loss and not 'shut it out'. Talking about the deceased to relatives and friends and sorting out the person's possessions will help enormously in coming to terms with your loss, even though it may be painful at first. At the beginning it is good, if possible, to see the dead person, touch them if you want to, attend the funeral and give expression to your emotions.

If you have doubts about the exact cause of death, make sure that you discuss it with your doctor as soon as possible.

If you have prolonged intense grief feelings, make sure that you get professional help. Avoid visiting spiritualists: they seem to aggravate the problem.

You may find considerable support from others who have suffered a similar loss and from various self-help organisations. Most people find that it is helpful to have a break away from the home, especially staying with sympathetic friends or relatives in a different area or in another state.

The first anniversary of a death or the first Christmas spent alone can be a very difficult time, and so it is good to make arrangements to have company at that time.