

Moving Through Grief - What's Normal?

By Lou LaGrand

Do you feel as though there is something wrong with you because of the way the death of your loved one is affecting you? Are those around you hinting that you have to "get hold of yourself" or you should be getting over "it"?

Don't let them add to your feelings of isolation because of their lack of understanding. Most everyone has a preconceived notion about what is and isn't a normal human response to the death of a loved one. But the problem is (and it's their problem) only you know the degree of emotional investment you had in the loved one who died--not your friends or family.

Grieve according to your timetable, not theirs. So what's normal that seems and feels so abnormal at times and that can scare our support persons? The following have all been associated with the grief process through the years.

1. Let's begin by understanding that grief is a long, complex journey with many ups and downs, and unpredictable twists and turns. No two people grieve in the same way, even in the same family. The process is so much longer than our culture teaches. Most mourners are initially filled with shock and disbelief, even when they have known that their loved one was going to die. One cannot fathom that the person is no longer physically present. You may feel numb, devoid of feeling. Normal.
2. You may (or may not) be filled with anger and/or resentment. Anger is often directed at medical personnel, sometimes at other family members, God, friends who don't show up, clergy, funeral directors, or the deceased--or for feeling abandoned. Do not expect your support network, as hard as they may try, to understand your grief or your anger. You may even be angry at yourself for what you did or did not do, whether real or imagined. Normal.
3. It is not uncommon to have a variety of physical responses, other than crying or screaming. Digestive disturbances, loss of appetite, headaches, fatigue, or the resurfacing of old aches and pains can be experienced. Nervousness or shaking, weight gain or weight loss have been reported. What we feel emotionally is normally transferred to every cell in the body. Usually, it all culminates in the inability to sleep.
4. You could feel a gnawing emptiness, or irritability, a sense of being overwhelmed, disoriented, or with no defenses. Disorganized thinking, forgetfulness, inability to concentrate, or confusion could occur. Fear of the future, being alone or panicking is sometimes reported. Guilt, regret, or depression may set in as time goes on and one replays a variety of scenarios leading up to the death. Surges or waves of emotion are frequent.
5. Over time, when the reality of the loss sinks in and early support begins to wane, the real work of grief begins. Here is where you may feel extreme loneliness, isolation, yearning, or difficulty in establishing new routines necessitated by the absence of your loved one. Feelings of rejection,

despair, or hopelessness may appear. This is also the time when well meaning people want you to get better in a hurry and you need to follow your own agenda for grieving.

Often life is questioned. What meaning can it possibly have now? You may see no purpose for you in a world without your beloved, and the very thought of ever feeling happy again is lunacy at best. You continue to procrastinate, find it hard to make decisions, lack focus, and could be impatient with everyone. At this time, it is essential to begin to work on establishing a new relationship with the deceased by learning to love in separation, beginning the search for meaning and attempting to reinvest in life.

To summarize, you undoubtedly will experience a number of the above responses to the death of a loved one. They have been, in various forms, experienced by millions of others before you. The overall necessity is to allow the grief process to unfold. Make every effort not to resist it. Let it naturally play out. No one can tell you how long it will take.

And, you are not weak because you still cry and miss the deceased. It is common to tear up at various times through the years when a poignant memory is triggered. That is healthy. Don't hold back the normal expression of emotion throughout your grief. Death changes us. We have to establish a new personal identity, and as we gradually heal, reclaim joy and enter the next chapter of life.

Each of us decides if and when we will be loss oriented or restoration oriented for the rest of our lives. Above all, remember that there is nothing wrong with you for having the feelings you have.