

Grief and the Mourning Process

THE PHASES OF GRIEF

Many people refer to the "stages" or "phases" of grief. It may be helpful to be aware of these identified phases or common aspects of grief. It is also important to know there is no right or wrong way to grieve. You may go back and forth between phases, experience more than one at a time, or even skip one all together. All feelings are normal, even if they seem "crazy".

- **Shock** is the first stage of numbness, disbelief and unreality.
- **Denial** is thoughts or words such as, "I don't believe it -- It can't be!"
- Bargaining involves making promises such as, "I'll be so good if only I can awaken to find this hasn't happened" or "I'll do all the right things if only..."
- **Guilt** is a hard stage and difficult to deal with alone. This is a normal feeling characterized by statements such as, "If only I had ... If only I had not..." done or said or thought something. Guilt may ultimately be resolved by understanding that all of us are human beings who give the best and worst of ourselves to others. What they do with what we give is their responsibility.
- **Anger** is another very difficult phase, but it may seem necessary in order to face reality and get beyond the loss. We all must heal in our own way and anger is a normal stage along the way. However, you may feel guilty because you are angry at the person who died or because your life is continuing while his or hers is not. If you don't feel anger, don't manufacture it!
- **Depression** may come and go and be different each time in length and/or intensity. Give yourself time to heal.
- **Resignation** means you finally believe the reality of the death.
- **Acceptance and Hope** come when you finally understand that you will never be the same, but you can go on to have meaning and purpose in your life.

FOUR "TASKS" OF GRIEF

Here are four steps toward surviving tragedy and loss:

- **Tell the story:** Talk about what has happened until it becomes real. Talk to caring family and friends, attend a support group, begin individual work with a mental health professional, but find a way to speak about the person who died and how the death has impacted your life and family. Tell the story until you don't need to tell it anymore. Chances are, you will be close to acceptance at that point.
- **Express the Emotions:** Grief is filled with conflicting tidal waves of emotion. Just when you think you've accepted the death, disbelief may sweep over you again. You may feel intense anger along with equally intense feelings of love and loss. Or, in the midst of crying about the person's death, a sense of unreality may surface again. No matter what the range of emotions, all are to be expected during grief. It is crucial to get the emotions outside of yourself. "Stuffed" feelings can build and build and become overwhelming. Scream, cry, write, draw, punch a punching bag, tell an empathetic someone, take a walk, do SOMETHING to express what you feel.
- **Make Meaning from the Loss:** Nothing can make what has happened "okay". Life is turned upside down and changed forever. However, you can determine that something good and reasonable will come out of the unreasonable tragedy that you are experiencing. At some point, you may be able to accept the reality that your loved one's entire life was not defined by his or her last decision - to die. Nothing can take away the good things the person accomplished. When you are ready, you may reach out to others with similar experiences... or set up a scholarship or other appropriate memorial in the person's name ... or work in some capacity to better the lives of others. There are many, many ways to make meaning from tragedy.
- **Transition from the Physical Presence of the Person to the New Relationship:** While missing the physical presence of a loved one in our lives may continue well into the future, it is possible to transition into acceptance of the person's nonphysical presence. What can that relationship be? For some, it is memories and love carried in our hearts. No one can take away our memories and, as long as we treasure love for the person who has died, they are not forgotten. The new relationship may be spiritual or in some other way in keeping with religious beliefs.