

# The Many Emotions of Grief

While it is important to understand grief and know how it can affect us, we must also acknowledge that:

“The focus of grief is not on our ability to understand, but on our ability to FEEL.”

In other words, grief is not just a thing of the HEAD; it is a thing of the HEART. It is not enough to KNOW about grief, it is something we experience. You have probably heard it said that “grief is not an event, it is a process.” While we also need to acknowledge that an individual’s emotional reaction will be unique and personal, there are a number of emotions we can identify with which many can identify.

## 1. Numbness

Often after a death, and the initial impact, people feel quite numb. Some might describe this as denial, but whatever the appropriate label, it is actually our human defense mechanism which “shuts down” until we can marshal our resources to face the reality of what has occurred. The problem is that others often confuse “numbness” with “strength”. How many times do we hear people commend the grieving person at the time of the death for “doing so well”, and for “how strong they are”. Then when a few months later the numbness wears off and the grieving person is overwhelmed by their emotions, the same folks can compound the difficulty with their well intentioned yet misguided statements of “what’s wrong with you. We thought you were doing so well,” implying that now the person *isn’t* doing so well. It is vitally important to let people know that their experiences, which may include shock, lack of concentration, forgetfulness, difficulty making decisions, confusion, fatigue, apathy, and others, are in fact natural and there is an explanation for them. This does not minimize their importance, however. The individual needs the confidence to know that they will be able to survive (a word taken from two Latin words, literally meaning “to live beyond.”)

Some Possible Emotions:

Shock	Numbness
Confusion	Lack of Concentration
Forgetfulness	Difficulty making Decisions
Fatigue	Apathy
There may be others.	What are some YOU have experienced?

People are sometimes tempted to believe they are losing their minds. But in fact this numbness or denial is our defense mechanism which protects us from the full impact of our loss until we are able to cope with it. You are not losing your mind; your mind is simply shutting out the harsh reality which may be too difficult to face right now.

Trust the process. Trust yourself

## 2. Disorientation

When the numbness wears off, (and every individual time frame is different,) what many people experience can be described as being like an explosion or an avalanche of emotions. Everything seems to touch the person on the raw nerve. There can be many emotions associated with grief and no one has a comprehensive list.

What is important is to validate these emotions, and to enable people to work with the feelings. If they can come to see that feelings teach us about the reaction to our old life, and to our new life without the presence of the person who died. Some in our society regard showing feelings as a sign of weakness. Confronted by emotions, many try to change the subject, or try to get you “not to think about it”. But good grief encourages people to work through the feelings, and allows them to express their emotions in appropriate ways. This is never easy, for the griever or the helper, yet it is the necessary process which will help them begin to reconcile what has happened.

Yet, throughout this “season of disorientation”, it still doesn’t seem *real* to the grieving individual. This is why we sometimes describe it as yearning, a word meaning “longing” or “desire”. The person can not yet believe that this has really happened, their desire is to “find” that which is lost, so they engage in the psychological task of searching. Reality will surely come. But how is it actualized?

The simple answer is “one disappointment after another”. We search and do not find, we yearn, but that longing is not fulfilled. Only after that important process can the reality of our loss be faced.

Some Possible Emotions:

Oversensitivity

Anxiety

Vulnerability

Impatience

Irritability

Yearning

There may be others.

Over-reacting

Fear

Panic,

Restlessness

Sadness

Searching

What are some YOU have experienced?

Some of the people who thought you were “strong” (when you were really NUMB) may now wonder, “What’s wrong”. They may comment that “You seemed to be doing so well” and imply that now that you are SO emotional, maybe there is something wrong, or pathological. In fact, these emotions are not a sign of growing weakness; they are an indication of increasing strength. Your mind has decided that you are a little more able to come to terms with this unbelievable thing that has occurred, and you are now feeling the pain of your grief.

Trust the process. Trust yourself.

### **3. Confrontation**

In one sense, the seasons of numbness and disorientation are a time of avoidance, and that is natural. The challenge of this process is to accept the reality of our loss and experience the pain of that realization. At first we are protected from the full impact, but the time comes when we are confronted by the reality of the fact that this person has died, and that there is nothing we can do to change it.

Thus this is characterized as a time of “angry sadness.” What is it that people confront? More often than not, the reality of the loss confronts people with their own powerlessness to change the situation, for if we could do anything to change the effect, we would surely do it. Thus, the grieving person confronts their sense of inadequacy to control the situation, and our need to master that becomes an issue of “what do you do, when there is nothing you can do?” This often becomes the foundation of the responses of anger, guilt and depression. It is wise to recognize that often the guilt and anger are related to that sense of powerlessness, and are a reaction to it, an attempt to gain some sense of control in a situation that is beyond control.

Some Possible Emotions:

Helplessness

Guilt

Loneliness

Physical Symptoms

Appetite disorders

There may be others.

Powerlessness

Anger

Depression

Sleep Disruptions

Digestive problems

What are some YOU have experienced?

Sometimes this “confrontation” comes long after the actual death. One eminent writer describes it as the “six month syndrome.” While I do not like to put any time frame on grief, it is often several months or even longer after the death that we confront the reality of our loss. Sometimes it is when people think you should have yourself together, that you feel like you are falling apart.

Trust the process. Trust yourself

#### **4. Adjustment**

Just as each grief response by every individual is unique, so the adjustments to that specific situation will be different in every case. The question that each individual must address is “How is my life different in the light of my loss?” That challenge will be faced in numerous areas of the individual’s life, including the following:

Practical adjustments, where there may be tasks that have to be assumed, some involving new skills or responsibilities; and tasks that may have to be relinquished, such as not having all the 1001 things to do for a loved one throughout an illness.

Emotional adjustments, such as coming to terms with loneliness, or not having this special person to talk to or share with, can be challenging.

Social adjustments, where activities that were shared with the deceased are no longer, or feeling “out of place” in a social setting because you are not there with that special person.

Physical adjustments, where the person may be missing the physical presence of someone, a person they hugged, made love to, or appreciated having THERE.

Perceptual adjustments, where the bereaved feel marginalized, as if people are

looking at them through different eyes, or treating them as broken, or “not quite whole”.

We are having to ask ourselves through the time of adjustment, “How is my life different in the light of my loss.” We need to find ways to empower ourselves to adjust to this new environment in which their lost relationship is missing.

Trust the process. Trust yourself

## **5. Reorganization**

The seasons of adjustment and reorganization are precursors to a reestablishment of life, by a social and emotional reentry to the everyday world. We learn to live with loss as we reinvest ourselves in new persons, ideas and things. Reconciliation of grief means coming to the place where we can accept life as meaningful, even in the light of loss. We do not recover from grief, in this sense that loss changes us from ever. But when we learn how to integrate loss into our life, and affirm that life is still meaningful, we have come full circle in our grief journey.

Of course, as T.S. Eliot puts it, “The end of our journey will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” This applies in a special way to grief. Grief should not last forever, and we need to come to the place where we move on. Every destination is the gateway to another journey.