



## Coping with Loss, Death and Bereavement

by  
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Sooner or later each one of us will face the loss of someone we care about and love.

It is the way of the world. Indeed, without death there could be no life. After all, if every single person that had ever lived had never died then there would simply be no room for us to live.

Yet knowing this seldom makes bereavement easier. So many of us have grown into a world where death is something of a taboo subject, something to be hidden from view and not talked about - something perhaps even to be denied. Let's not talk about it and perhaps we can avoid it.

But we cannot avoid it. Eventually, we all have to cope when we are finally faced with loss and with the death of someone we love or care about.

Mixed in with the harsh reality of death, nature does have its own special form of inbuilt kindness. Shortly after the death of a loved one, relative or friend, most people feel as if they are stunned and numb. It's as if it simply does not fully sink in.

This feeling of emotional numbness can be of great help in the coming hours and days. It allows the grieving person to cope with the practicalities that now need to be taken care of: things such as contacting family members and friends and arranging for the funeral.

For many, actually viewing the dead body and attending the funeral can be valuable ways of coming to terms with death's finality.

Often, though, nature's numbing anaesthesia disappears and can be exchanged for a tremendous yearning for the person no longer there.

Sometimes this makes it difficult to concentrate or to sleep. At times the survivor may look for, or imagine that they see their loved one in various places and situations, even though they know that this is logically not possible.

For some, there is a period of anger following the death. This anger may be directed towards those who have done their very best to help - nurses and doctors, relatives and friends and even towards the dead person who has left them alone.

Often guilt can surface, with the living continually examining the past, what they did or did not do or say while the loved one was still alive. If the death was drawn out and prolonged, the individual may feel guilty that he or she actually hoped that the person would die in order to spare him or her further pain. Yet this feeling of relief is entirely natural and not at all uncommon and it is certainly understandable.

These emotions can easily be followed by periods of sadness and a tendency to become withdrawn. Depression can be experienced, often peaking around a month or so after the death has occurred.

All this is part of the natural process of grieving and as such it needs to be understood rather than feared.

Many people feel the need to avoid other people during this often difficult time, but though entirely understandable, it is often best if the individual begins to ease themselves into and return to normal activities after two or three weeks.

With the passage of time, the grieving does become easier as the acute pain begins to subside and the individual is again able to look to the future. Just how long this time is depends, of course, on the individual him or herself.

The final stage of grieving sees the person letting go of the one who has died and the possible beginning of a new life. Depression lifts and energy levels return. Even sleep improves. All these stages of mourning may overlap, with most people recovering from a bereavement within one or two years or so.

There is no single way of grieving, of course. Each one of us finds our own way to cope and deal with the death of a loved one. And different cultures deal with death in different ways.

Friends and family can be of enormous help to the grieving person. Simply spending time with him or her, perhaps holding a hand, is worth so very much. Words are not always necessary. Just letting the person know that he or she is not alone can bring real comfort and relief.

It is essential that the individual be allowed to express their feelings in any way that they can. In time they will adjust and learn to come to terms with the death, but first they need to feel and experience the loss. If they feel like crying, or if they want to talk about their feelings then they need to be allowed to do so, without feeling judged or criticized. Similarly, if they do not wish to talk about things or cry in private then this needs to be respected too.

Losing someone who meant something to us is one of the most difficult experiences that any of us can endure. It can be frightening and overwhelming and it is easy to feel lost and confused when we experience bereavement.

For those who are really unable to deal with the grief and who continue to experience depression and difficulty for an extended period of time, it might be wise to consider some form of bereavement counseling. Your doctor can put you in touch with a suitably trained and qualified counselor who can help in a sensitive and compassionate manner.

Yes, the finality of death can feel overwhelming. But, just as life has a way of surprising us, so too may death. Perhaps it is not really as final as it may appear to our eyes.

As the sage Lao-Tsu once said: 'What a caterpillar calls the end, the rest of the world calls a butterfly'.

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