

## The Nature of Grief

When someone in our life dies, the loss follows us wherever we go. It can overflow into “normal” work-lives and routines, triggered by something seemingly benign like a TV soap commercial; a sad look a co-worker gives us, or a chance meeting with an acquaintance who doesn’t know about the loss. And while others may have very good intentions, their comforting words can actually be awkward and sometimes worsen our grief as we try to cope and do our jobs.

An understanding of the nature of grief can help both the griever and those trying to console him or her. Consider these aspects of grief:

- > **You don’t get over it—you get *through* it.** Like a tree struck by lightning, the loss forever changes us. The best we can do is integrate the loss into our lives and honor the loved one in our memories and actions as we live on.
- > **It doesn’t *end* at a certain time and never leaves us completely**—it’s like a houseguest who comes out of his/her room to visit less and less over time. There isn’t a predictable schedule for someone to heal, and expecting one to do so isn’t helpful or realistic.
- > **It can be a tangle of many emotions all at once, not just sadness**—people can feel mad, confused, depressed, guilty, lonely, and exhausted all in a single day.
- > **Grief changes over time and doesn’t move in a straight path**—numbness turns into sadness; sadness can turn into anger; anger can turn back into sadness and then can back to numbness for a while before morphing into another feeling.
- > **As people re-engage in their lives, they can feel *guilty* for times when they realize they haven’t been thinking of their loved one**—distractions, especially if one has laughed or had an enjoyable moment, can bring on self-criticism for not tending to their sadness.

**Unexpected deaths through accidents or suicide can add other layers of difficulty in coping:**

- > **Our sense of safety is shaken when someone dies young, accidentally, or from a sudden illness**—we don’t expect it and have difficulty accepting it because it makes us feel vulnerable.
- > **We can feel compelled to *explain* a senseless death**—this can lead well-intentioned people to tell a person grieving, “There must be a reason and it will be revealed in time.” This kind of sentiment is not helpful and can feel unsympathetic.
- > **Some of us may take on guilt**—Some may think, “If only I had known x...” or “If only I had done y, I could visited or talked with ...and let them know I cared”.

### What can help:

- > **Routines**—Returning to “normal” life, including work, can give people a sense that life can slowly begin to go on. It also offers grievers something tangible to do, which can be a relief from being at home engulfed by their sadness.
- > **Expression**—Whether it’s with family, friends, or a grief counselor or group, expressing feelings, worries, and fears helps people heal. It can also allow the person to access the fond memories of a loved one that would be buried by stifling the grief.
- > **Support**—Asking for needed assistance with childcare, company, or dealing with bills, house-cleaning or other tasks, is essential for a person in grief to keep from being overwhelmed. Death often brings complicated issues with it, such as financial concerns or changes in housing. Asking for support from others can help with these added burdens.
- > **Distraction**—Giving oneself permission to take time away from grieving provides a much needed rest. Whether it is working, movies, hobbies, taking time to play with children or pets, or spending time with friends, distraction can offer a brief break.
- > **Self-Care**—Sleep and appetite are often disrupted as people sleepwalk through the first weeks and months of a loss. Eating regular meals, getting out for daily walks, and refraining from alcohol (which is a depressant), can go a long way to help someone gradually begin to feel better. Regular doctor’s visits and utilizing a counselor’s support are also important self-care steps during this time.
- > **Set Boundaries**—While others’ condolences can feel supportive initially, their sad faces each time they see a griever, or a continual “how are you?” can be awkward, painful, or even annoying as someone begins to think less about the loss during the workday. If you are grieving, consider setting a boundary with co-workers not to ask you about how you’re doing at work unless you bring it up. If you’re uncomfortable doing this yourself, you might ask a close friend to “run interference” for you and communicate this request to your colleagues. It’s ok to say “... I rather not talk about this right now.”
- > **Take Grief Breaks**—Know that some days will be harder than others, and give yourself permission to take a “grief break” at work if you are suddenly overwhelmed with feelings. Acknowledging the feelings and letting them pass through you will help them begin to subside.
- > **Call Your EAP**—You can access telephonic support 24/7 through your EAP by calling, (800)777-4114. Your EAP can also provide you with a face-to-face counseling referral for support over the coming months. Counselors can assist you with decision-making, coping skills, how to help your children deal with the loss, and emotional support.

Whether you’re introverted or more extraverted, grief can make a person withdrawn, despairing, and lonely. Remember you have resources and don’t have to deal with the loss of a loved one alone. Reach out to your EAP—we are here for you.