



Understanding Bereavement

Bereavement is a normal response to the powerful stress of loss. The loss of others through death is a universal experience and it can be one of the most distressing events of our lives. Over 80% of college students report the death of at least one loved person in their lives—grandparents, parents, siblings, teachers, and friends. And, each year thousands of college students themselves die because of accidents, illnesses, trauma, and, suicide. In fact, at any one time, over 20% of college undergraduates have lost a loved one within the previous year, and over 35 % within the previous 2 years.

Everyone responds to these losses in their own way...no one response is “correct” or “necessary,” however, emotional and physical symptoms can seem overwhelming and perhaps even feel frightening.

Feelings can include

- shock, which protects from the impact of the loss for a while
- disbelief, because it must be a mistake
- anger toward oneself for doing/not doing something...toward the deceased for dying...toward God for allowing this to happen
- blaming oneself, the deceased, anyone
- denial, not allowing feelings to surface
- fear, wondering if it always will hurt so bad
- sadness, overwhelming feelings of loss, lack of interest in usual things
- tearfulness
- anxiety, running and intrusive thoughts, worrying
- relief that suffering is over for the deceased
- longing to make everything as it used to be
- depression, isolation, loneliness
- numbness, no feelings at all
- helplessness, in specific or general ways
- avoidance of pleasurable activities
- neediness, not wanting to be alone or to have to make decisions
- irritability, everything is annoying
- preoccupation with the loss
- difficulty with even routine decisions
- startling easily
- feelings of unreality

- disinterest in usual activities
- guilt about feelings
- relief about continuing to live

Physical reactions can include

- fatigue
- digestion problems
- headaches
- dizziness
- shakiness
- weakness
- changes in sleep
- nightmares
- changes in eating
- skin problems

There is no timetable for bereavement or for its intensity. Some people do not seem to show obvious signs of grief; their post-loss adjustment can be as healthy as those who show more “traditional” grief. Never assume to know how a bereaved person feels or what they are experiencing in their loss.

How bereavement is experienced is not a measure of how much the loss is felt nor is it a measure how much the person was loved and is missed. There is no “right way” to grieve.

There are, however, “wrong ways” to grieve...ways that are not helpful to the bereaved person. These include

- reliance on alcohol or drugs
- taking care of everyone else without self-care
- engaging in risky behavior
- staying away from friends
- avoiding pleasurable activities
- contemplating self-harm

Some ways that likely *will* help during bereavement include

- eat regularly
- sleep enough
- get some exercise
- keep routines as much as possible
- avoid big decisions
- ask for help
- allow emotions, and allow a break from emotions
- use spiritual strengths
- spend time with people
- continue to plan things for personal growth and enjoyment

Following a death, surviving bereaved family members receive support from friends. Friends, then, sometimes do not feel entitled to their own grief, and, so, ignore their own sadness and loss. In reality, friends too experience bereavement and will benefit from paying attention to their own feelings and needs.

A small number of people develop a more complicated grief. They seem to lose meaning in their lives and the general business of living. They withdraw from relationships, continue to be preoccupied with the deceased person, and often experience a break in their personal belief systems. They are stuck in their grief. It is important to help these people connect with their pastor, their physician, or a mental health professional.

Most people, however, have an adaptable resilience after even great loss. They again engage in their own lives, continuing with the love and memories of the deceased person as an important part of their own history. So, although grief generally is not “resolved,” it is reconciled and it allows making new memories and having new love. In fact, many people find new meaning in their own lives during bereavement; they reconnect with their own strengths and dreams, often deepening their spiritual foundation and their relationships.

Need further help? Contact Counseling Services.

Kansas State University Counseling Services

English/Counseling Services Building

Manhattan, Kansas 66506

785-532-6927

Written by

Joyce A. Woodford, Ph.D.

©2008 Kansas State University Counseling Services

