The Five Stages of Loss & Grief

Each of us at some point in our lives will encounter the loss of someone or something important to us. Grief is the emotional reaction we feel after a loss. To feel pain after loss is normal. The death of a loved one, a divorce, loss of functioning of part of our body or even the loss of a job or promotion can cause grief. Grief differs from person to person based on individual differences in emotional make up, whom or what we have lost, and how much our daily life is changed by the loss. There are five stages of grief that most people will pass through after a loss. People usually move from one stage to the next in order but may also move through them out of order.

Five Stages of Grief:

1) Denial

This is usually the first reaction people have to a loss. When the person is told of the event there may be a feeling of numbness or being in a daze that does not allow the person to fully comprehend what has just happened. This stage may last a few minutes or longer depending on the person and situation. The person may withdraw from the situation and further social contact to process the information. They may feel like this cannot be happening. There is usually no crying or acknowledgement of the loss at this stage.

2) Anger

The grieving person may lash out at the person delivering the news, at himself for letting this happen or at the world in this stage, even if, realistically, nothing could have stopped the incident from happening. The person may ask "why me?" or have feelings of wanting to get even or fight back. The anger may also be aimed at the deceased, blaming them for leaving.

3) Bargaining

Now the grieving person may try to negotiate by praying, wishing or begging God, himself or others to take away the loss. They may ask, "If I do this, then will you take away the loss?"

4) Depression

The person may feel lack of control or numbness in addition to anger and sadness which may linger below the surface. The grief may bring on feelings of overwhelming hopelessness, frustration, bitterness, self pity, mourning the loss of the person as well as the hopes, dreams and plans for the future. The realization that the situation isn’t going to change sets in. The loss happened and there is nothing that will change the situation. This acknowledgement of the situation is often what will bring on the depression.
5) Acceptance

The person has not forgotten what happened but is able to begin to move forward. The depression, anger and mourning have lessened in this stage. There is a realization that the person, opportunity or former health is gone and there is acceptance of the fact that the loss has occurred. At this stage the person starts to find the good in life again and starts to come out of the pain of loss and heal.

We are all individuals who deal with grief in different ways (remember everyone's reactions and grief are distinct). The above stages are meant as a guide to the process of grieving, not grief procedures that must be followed. By understanding the basic concepts about the grief process and the feelings we have in common, it can help us the next time we ourselves or someone we care about experiences a loss. We can find it easier to deal with emotions if we know what to expect.

The tips below can also help you comfort another suffering from a loss. The person may be feeling alone or isolated.

1. Try to be yourself.

2. Give the person a hug when you see them, send a card or flowers or just help with practical things like cleaning, babysitting or shopping.

3. Listen to what they have to say without giving advice or easy answers. Do not be afraid to talk about their loss if they bring it up.

4. Encourage them to care for themselves physically and emotionally.

5. Avoid minimizing the loss and avoid clichés.

6. Show patience and understanding.

7. Try to allow the person to feel the loss, do not distract them from the grief with forced cheerfulness.

8. Guilt is part of grieving even though there may not be any factual basis for the guilt. Do not attempt to account for or suppress the guilt, just listen.

9. Acknowledge your limitations and encourage the person to seek professional help when needed.

The Employee Assistance Program is there to help in these situations with short-term counseling, information and referrals for additional support if necessary.

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