



Working Effectively with Grief

What is Grief & Loss ?

Loss :

Occurs when the individual experiences an event that they perceive to be negative and results in long-term changes to a significant part of their life (*e.g. losing important relationships, deaths, diminished physical and cognitive abilities due to age, health or medical conditions*).

Grief :

Reactions to the loss which can manifest differently in people even if they are facing the same type of loss or situation of loss.

What are some common grief responses?

Thoughts :

- Difficulty concentrating.
- Difficulty with decision-making.
- Preoccupation with the loss (*e.g. spending a lot of time thinking about the lost person, shared memories of the loss*).

Behaviors :

- Withdrawal from active life or noticeable social isolation.
- Significant changes in eating patterns / sleeping patterns.
- Increase in use of alcohol and other substances.
- Difficulty in organising daily tasks.
- Assuming mannerisms or traits of the loved one.



Mood :

- Obvious changes in mood (*e.g. more easily angry, irritated or aggressive, or quieter than usual*).
- Varied feelings:
 - Sadness
 - Anger
 - Guilt, self-blame
 - Fear, anxiety
 - Helplessness
 - Loneliness

Myths & Facts about Grief

Myth

Fact

Grief is linear



There is no standard pattern or order to grief. Everyone grieves differently so avoid telling the person how they 'should' be thinking, doing, or feeling.

Grief lasts for about a year



Grief has no fixed timeline or defined endpoint. How long it takes varies based on different factors including the type of loss, the context in which the loss occurred, social support, etc.

Grief will heal over time



Grief can heal through the passage of time, but not always. Time alone does not heal grief. It is crucial for the grieving individual to reach out to others for support and process the loss in a positive manner.

Grief is something to 'get over'



Grief is not something you can simply leave behind and hope it never affects you anymore. Grief is something to be worked through and integrated into your life.

Talking about grief only makes it worse



Talking about one's grief provides the person with an opportunity to acknowledge, reflect on, and process their grief.

Types of Grief

Types

How the Person Grieves

How to Support

Intuitive

Emotional.
Heals through sharing feelings about their grief with others.

Offer them a listening ear and gently explore their emotions with them.

Instrumental

Cognitive/physical experience.
Heals through problem-solving and engaging in tasks or activities.

Encourage information-seeking so that the person can plan and solve problems related to the loss in manageable steps.

Blended

Characteristics of both intuitive and instrumental grievers.

There is usually one grieving style that is more dominant than the other. Offer support accordingly.

Dissonant

Conflict between how the person wants to express their grief and how they actually do so.

Maintain non-judgemental stance and establish trust and safety in the relationship so that they person feels comfortable to grieve naturally.

Grieving across the ages

► Children

- Children who have lost a loved one appear to switch quickly between crying and playing. This does not mean that the child is not sad or they have 'completed' their grieving, they could be finding ways to cope with the loss without becoming overwhelmed.
- Younger children may not understand yet the concept of 'death' and may ask a lot of questions about death and dying.
- Euphemisms (e.g. the deceased is sleeping) can confuse them or hinder their ability to develop healthy coping skills.
- It is common for children to engage in 'magical thinking' where they believe that something they said or did is directly responsible for the death.



What to do

- Be open, gentle, and honest with them during discussions about death. Be mindful of your tone and body language when discussing death with children – if you seem tense and upset, the child may internalise negative associations with death and dying.
- If the child holds false beliefs that something they did or said is responsible for their loved one's death, reassure them that this is not the case and they do not have to be afraid or upset with themselves.
- Find creative ways for the child to express themselves as they may not have the language yet to tell you how they are feeling.

➤ Youths

- Compared to children, youths have a deeper understanding of abstract concepts about death and grief. They may start engaging with you on abstract conversations about death and meaning of life.
- However, they often still struggle to understand and cope with the ambiguity of it.
- Youths tend to experience intense emotional reactions to significant losses, but they do not yet know how to handle or comfortably talk about them. They may withdraw from their peers/family and/or increase their engagement in risky behaviors.

What to do

- Remain calm, warm, and open to what the youth is sharing with you. Converse with them about death, loss, and/or meaning of life as best as you can.
- Help the young person to identify people and activities that help them feel safe and supported.

➤ Adults

- Grief does not always have to involve death of a loved one. It could also come from the loss of a significant relationship (e.g. *through divorce*), loss of health (e.g. *receiving a difficult medical diagnosis*), loss of self-esteem (e.g. *getting laid off*).



What to do

- Remain calm, warm, and open to what the person is sharing with you about their loss. Converse with them about death, loss, and/or meaning of life as best as you can.
- Help them to identify these possible coping strategies and come up with a plan together for them to engage with healthy coping (e.g. people or activities where they feel safe and supported).
- Speak with your volunteer manager if you have any concerns that the adult is not coping well with the loss and/or may require professional support.

Other helpful ways to cope with grief

- Grief is difficult but often the symptoms go away in a few months. Long-term grief can lead to depression, so it is important to get helping recovering.
- Tips for someone who is grieving:
 - Try not to make immediate major changes.
 - Try to eat right, exercise, and get enough sleep.
 - Lean on friends and family for support.
 - Stay busy with career, volunteerism, or join a grief support group.
 - Seek therapy and counselling to work through grief safely and positively.
- Help them to access further support if needed (*e.g. approaching NuLife for counselling support*).

