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Navigating Loss

Most definitions of grief focus on the death of a loved one. While death is one possible cause of grief, many other major changes can also cause feelings of grief and loss. Grief can come on suddenly, such as when a loved one dies or another event occurs unexpectedly. Other times the grieving process starts even before the loss takes place, called anticipatory grief. It could last for months or years leading up to the loss. When a loved one is ill, you might grieve the person they used to be or the relationship you used to have with them.

Since loss and change are a natural part of living, everyone experiences grief at some point in their lives. Though the grief process has common stages, everyone's journey through it is personal. Here are some tools that can help you as you learn to live with the loss, no matter where you are on your individual journey.

Knowing the stages of grief

Being familiar with the common stages of grief can help you better understand and manage the various emotions that come and go as you cope with a loss. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a famous psychiatrist, first introduced a model with the different stages of grief in 1969.

The five stages include:

- **Denial** - This can't be happening.
- **Anger** - Why is this happening to me? Who is to blame?
- **Bargaining** - If only....I would do anything for this not to be happening....
- **Depression** - I don't feel like doing anything.
- **Acceptance** - I accept what is happening or what has happened.

The grief process does not necessarily occur in a fixed order. You may experience one stage repeatedly and not experience others at all. As Kubler-Ross said, "There is no typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grieving is an individual as our lives." The main benefit of the model is to help you understand that grief is a continual processing of feelings over time.

Factors that influence your reactions

There is no right or wrong way to grieve or to adjust to how your life has changed. You will likely experience grief in waves—some days you may feel at peace and other days may be harder.

Many other factors can also your reaction to a loss, such as:

- Context of the loss (whether it was anticipated/unexpected/tragic)
- Nature of your relationship to the lost person/place/situation/pet
- Prior experiences with loss
- Overall stability at the time of the loss
- Available support networks/resources
- Individual coping style

Where mindfulness and gratitude fit in

It is hard to prepare for a loss that you know is coming or inevitable. Even when life seems to be going smoothly, you might struggle with worry or anxiety about losing something or someone.

Positive psychology researchers believe that the greatest insurance is to live your life fully in the moment, savor the time you have with your loved ones, and practice being grateful for what you do have on a regular basis.

This serves as a protective mechanism because then when you do experience a loss, you will at least know you lived those moments to the fullest and enjoyed the time you had with your loved ones.

Alternatively, if you spend your time worrying about what might happen or dwelling on how you are going to lose someone someday, you will end up compounding your grief. You'll be grieving wasted time in addition to the loss itself.

Allow yourself space to grieve

One of the most important steps in coping with grief is simply allowing yourself to feel your emotions. It is okay to feel however you feel. You might feel happy one moment and then something reminds you of your loss, and you suddenly feel overcome with sadness.

Have some compassion for yourself. However you are feeling is completely normal and part of the process.

Take care of yourself

What is it you need right now? This could be as simple as eating your favorite meal, getting extra sleep, getting some exercise, or scheduling a checkup with your doctor. Though grief can be overwhelming at times, don't forget to check in with yourself and take time for whatever it is you need in that moment.

Using and finding support

You might have the urge to isolate when you are grieving, but it is important to have social support during this time. Talk to friends or family about how you're feeling. Don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it, such as with light housework or meals. For certain losses, it might be helpful to join a support group with others who have gone through a similar experience. Seek professional help if you are struggling to perform your typical daily activities or feel as if life isn't worth living.

Returning to a sense of normalcy

Experiencing a major loss can interfere with your daily functioning and schedule. Once you feel ready, try to start getting back into your usual activities and restart your routine. This can help you build momentum and remember your purpose in life.

There is not necessarily a definite end date when it comes to grief - you might never stop grieving a significant loss. However, you can learn tools to help you cope with and honor your loss. Though life will be different after you experience a loss, it is important to take care of yourself, focus on your purpose, and make the most of each day.