

How to Deal With Grief

Grief is the normal response of sorrow, emotion, and confusion that comes from losing someone or something important to you. It is a natural part of life. Grief is a typical reaction to death, divorce, job loss, a move away from family and friends, or loss of good health due to illness.

You may feel empty and numb, as if you are in shock. You may notice physical changes such as trembling, nausea, trouble breathing, weakness, or trouble sleeping and eating.

You may become angry - at a situation, a particular person, or just angry in general. Almost everyone in grief also experiences guilt. Guilt is often expressed as "I could have, I should have, and I wish I would have" statements.

People in grief may have strange dreams or nightmares, be absent-minded, withdraw socially, or lack the desire to return to work. While these feelings and behaviors are normal during grief, they will pass.

HOW LONG DOES GRIEF LAST?

Grief lasts as long as it lasts. For some people, grief lasts a few months. For others, grieving may take years. The length of time spent grieving is different for each person and no matter how long you grieve, it is OK.

HOW WILL I KNOW WHEN I'M DONE GRIEVING?

Every person who experiences a death or other loss completes a four-step grieving process:

1. Accept the loss;
2. Allow yourself to feel the physical and emotional pain of grief;
3. Adjust to living in a world without the person or item lost; and
4. Move forward with life.

How Does Grief Differ From Depression?

Depression is more than a feeling of grief after losing someone or something you love. Clinical depression is a whole body disorder. It can take over the way you think and feel. Symptoms of depression include:

- A sad, anxious, or "empty" mood that won't go away
- Loss of interest in what you used to enjoy
- Low energy, fatigue, feeling "slowed down"
- Changes in sleep or eating patterns
- Trouble concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Feeling hopeless, guilty, or helpless
- Thoughts of death or suicide or a suicide attempt
- Recurring aches and pains

If you recently experienced a death or other loss, these feelings may be part of a normal grief reaction. But if these feelings persist with no lifting mood, ask for help.

WHERE CAN I FIND HELP?

The following list provides information and support for coping with grief:

Grief Recovery Hotline (800) 445-4808
www.griefnet.org
www.growthhouse.org
www.transformations.com
www.mentalhealth.org

COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

Curt H Drennen, Psy.D., R.N.
Division of Mental Health
3824 West Princeton Circle
Denver, CO 80236

Phone: 303-866-7403
Fax: 303-866-7428
Email: curt.drennen@state.co.us

Colorado Department of
Human Services

Colorado Mental
Health Disaster
Response
System

Division of Mental Health



Traumatic
Stress and
Grief

What Is Traumatic Stress?

Traumatic events are shocking and emotionally overwhelming. People who experience or witness them may have reactions of intense fear, horror, or helplessness. These events might involve actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual or other physical assault.

Traumatic events can be one-time occurrences, such as a motor vehicle or airplane accident, natural disaster, house fire, or violent crime, or they can be repeated and ongoing, like in child abuse and neglect, forms of domestic violence, and combat.

It is very common for people to experience anxiety, fear, and shock after a traumatic event, as well as emotional numbness and personal or social disconnection. People often cannot remember significant parts of what happened, yet may be bothered by fragments of memories that return in physical and psychological flashbacks. Nightmares of the trauma are common. So are depression, irritability, sleep disturbance, and feeling jumpy.

Some of the problems people encounter after a traumatic event can be more problematic. Experiences of dissociation (feelings of distorted reality or disconnection), bothersome thoughts and images, and efforts to avoid reminders of the traumatic experiences, may result in severe life disruption. When these experiences last more than a month, they might be symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depres-

sion or an anxiety disorder.

Other uncomfortable problems or symptoms may exist. For example, a traumatic event often challenges people's sense of personal safety and control. They might feel less secure, more vulnerable, and personally changed. Physical health may suffer as well, and individuals may notice increased feelings of fatigue, headaches, and other physical symptoms.

Many people traumatized in childhood also experience re-victimization (being harmed again), aggression, or identity disturbance (a feeling that you don't know who you are). They can have problems such as illnesses or aches and pains without real physical cause (somatization), difficulty staying on an even keel emotionally, and relationship problems.



How to Decide Whether You Need Help

People who have had traumatic life experiences cope the best way they can with the memories and painful effects. For many people, reactions gradually diminish over time. Activities that are helpful include:

- ◆ Talk about what happened
- ◆ Talk about your feelings
- ◆ Joining a trusted group
- ◆ Getting involved in activities that help to

reconnect with people and find meaning in life.

But for some people, the symptoms and disturbing reactions do not go away. This can lead people to adopt bad ways to cope, such as withdrawing from friends and family, using drugs or alcohol, or avoiding activities that are empowering. It is important to consider seeking help if important areas of life, such as relationships, work, or school, are being affected by traumatic stress. Likewise, people who become more and more depressed or anxious, or those for whom the use of alcohol or other drugs increases significantly, may need treatment.

WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

People who wish to consider professional support should select a someone who is knowledgeable about traumatic stress. A family doctor, clergy person, local mental health association, state psychiatric, psychological, or social work association, or health insurer may be helpful in providing a referral to a counselor or therapist with experience in treating people affected by traumatic stress.

For more information about traumatic stress or the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, call 1-877-507-PTSD (7873).

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