



Institiúid na gComhairleoirí Treorach
INSTITUTE OF GUIDANCE COUNSELLORS

***Allowing Yourself
To Grieve
When You Lose A Friend

A Guide For Young People***

***The Institute
Of Guidance
Counsellors***

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Allowing Yourself To Grieve

When You Lose A Friend

A Guide For You People

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1. What is Grief?

Grief is a strong, sometimes overwhelming, range of emotions we experience when we suffer a loss. We can find ourselves feeling numb, shocked, angry, guilty, sad and unable to carry on with normal life while saddled with a strong sense of loss. Grief is a normal and natural reaction to loss. Individual experiences of grief vary from one person to another and are strongly influenced by the nature of the loss. Dealing with death takes time – not just days, but weeks, months and maybe even years, but generally the pain is tempered as time passes and as we adapt to life without the person who has died.

Grieving is a unique experience for each of us and is not a task with definable, sequential steps. Grief is not an illness that needs to be cured. It's not a bridge to be crossed; it is not a burden to bear, or an experience to 'recover' from. It is a normal, healthy and predictable response to loss. Grief is not a disorder, a disease, or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical, and spiritual necessity; it is the price we pay for love. The only way to deal with grief is to grieve.

When we are grieving we do not need to be *fixed* nor do we need to be *taught* how to grieve, but rather, *allow* ourselves to grieve and to make our own meaning of our new world without the friend who has died. There is no set schedule for grief and no timetable for how long it will hurt. Grieving does not go in a straight line and sometimes it does a U-turn. Grief is a process not an event and mourning our loss is hard work - hard emotional work. We need to walk through grief, not run. Everybody experiences grief in their lifetime and we eventually learn to adapt to our new and different life without the physical presence of the friend who has died.

2. The Feelings

2.1 Shock & Denial

In the immediate aftermath of a death we can sometimes refuse to accept or believe the news. This can manifest itself in numbness, disbelief, shock or we may feel as if we are in a daze. This shock can be particularly acute if the death was unexpected, or occurred because of a horrific accident. Indeed, if you were involved in, or witnessed the accident, the sense of shock can be profound.

We can wake in the morning forgetting for a brief moment that the death has occurred, only to remember again and retreat back into a state of numbness. When some people use the term '*numb*', it is used to describe the fact that they are feeling nothing. In actual fact, *numbness* is a feeling in itself. This state of numbness/disbelief/shock can be viewed as the mind protecting itself from the enormity of what has happened. It gives us time to get ourselves ready and to prepare ourselves to feel the intense pain of the loss. This is nature's way of protecting our mind so that we are not overwhelmed. It helps us prepare ourselves so everything sinks in when we are ready.

In the immediate aftermath of a loss, denial can be used as a defence mechanism to protect us from the intensity of the loss and the reality of the situation, in the long term this denial is unhealthy. We need to let go of the numbness, disbelief and shock and allow ourselves to accept the reality of what has happened. The reality of what has happened does hurt and hurt a lot, but denial hurts for even longer.

2.2 Guilt

Following a death we can sometimes experience a great deal of guilt. We may feel guilty about what we did or did not do in the past, or what we may have said or not said to the person who has died. We might say to ourselves over and over again, *'if only'*, or *'I should have'*. Feelings of guilt can be intensified over past relationship problems or rows between us and the person who has died and not having had a chance to make amends. If the death was as a result of an accident that you witnessed or were involved, the sense of guilt over your own survival can be profound.

Guilt can also manifest itself in having taken the relationship for granted and not appreciating it at the time. Our guilt can sometimes be irrational. For example, we can feel guilty about not having done something to prevent the death. Even though this may be totally irrational - in that there was no way we could have influenced the outcome - the guilty feelings can be very real and intense.

As time moves on, the stimulus for our guilt can change. We can feel guilty about laughing, having fun, or enjoying ourselves without the person who died being with us. We may feel guilty about returning to normal daily activities and getting on with our lives. Sometimes, we can try to get rid of our feelings of guilt by blaming others. In the short term this blaming of others helps us avoid having to deal with, feel, and work through, our guilt.

Whatever the source of our guilt we need to allow ourselves feel it, process it, and understand it so that we can give ourselves permission to begin to feel something different. Remember, it is normal to feel guilty about the past, to feel guilt about moving on, as much as it is normal to move on. After all, it is what happens everybody on the planet who has experienced a loss.

2.3 Anger & Blame

The feelings of pain and loss when someone has died can be excruciating. To avoid this pain we can replace it with anger. We can be angry at God, angry at the world, angry at the medical profession or angry at the deceased for not looking after themselves. We can even be angry at the person who has died for putting us through this pain and/or past pain (this may eventually require us to forgive those who inflicted this pain on us). Sometimes our anger can be irrational and directed at blaming others simply because there is nowhere else to put our anger. Sometimes this blaming of others gives us some sense of control over a situation we have no control over. We can even direct our anger at ourselves for caring so much about the person who has died and now it hurts, and hurts bad. Also, sometimes our anger can be used to mask our own feelings of guilt. Is anger easier to handle than guilt?

We need to realise we are angry, realise and understand the source of our anger and let ourselves feel the anger. We need to think it through, express it rationally, feel it, and if needs be, feel it again, and let it burn itself out.

2.4 Sadness

One of the key components of grief is a feeling of intense sadness. Sadness can mean different things to different people. For some it can feel like our heart is tearing in two, or we can feel an intense pain within us, or a strong sense of emptiness, or a piece of us is missing, or we can feel a sense of inward desolation. Sadness occurs when we realise we have lost someone and there is nothing we can do about it. Sadness turns our attention inwards so that we can take stock and adjust to our loss. Sadness promotes personal reflection, turns our attention inwards, and promotes resignation and acceptance and helps us accept and accommodate the loss. Feeling sadness, allows the realisation of what has happened to sink in. Or is it the other way around? Is it because we are beginning to accept what has happened, and accommodate our loss and adjusting to it – that we feel sad? If so, is sadness a necessary emotion signalling that we are moving into a different phase of our lives accepting that the person who has died will not be physically present.

2.5 Other Feelings

Following the death of someone who was a big part of our lives we can experience a myriad of other feelings. We can feel a sense of abandonment and rejection or even betrayal because we expected the person who we relied upon to be there for us. We can feel frightened about the future without the person who has died or frightened about forgetting about the deceased or indeed frightened about our own mortality because we now realise we too will eventually die. Also, because we had no control over what has happened to the person we have lost, we can experience a sense of hopelessness or loss of control over what has happened in our life. In addition we can experience other feelings that are not listed here. This is perfectly normal.

The feelings brought on by grief are not just like a roller coaster, but like a roller coaster, merry-go-round and a bungee jump all in one. Some feelings can stay with us for a while, then be replaced by another feeling and then return to hit us like a train. Each feeling needs to be felt, understood, and processed, and if needs be, felt, understood, and processed again and again for as long as it takes. In the words of Winston Churchill, *'if you're going through hell – keep going'*.

3. Change In Our Behaviour

Grieving is very much associated with *internal* feeling such as loss, anger, regret, guilt, and sadness etc. While these emotions are internal, they can display themselves *externally* through our behaviours and words. For example, when someone has died we feel we have no control over what has happened and no control over how we feel. Because we all need to feel in control of what is going on around us, and in order to gain a sense of security, we can sometimes behave in a childlike way because childhood was a time when we felt secure and protected.

Similarly, if we have feelings of guilt we may seek to punish ourselves for example, denying ourselves something or being punished by others to get rid of the guilt. We may also be tempted to withdraw and isolate ourselves from the world or those around us. In the short term this isolation is beneficial in that withdrawal helps us to avoid exposing and exploring our feelings and facing up to our feelings. To engage with others and the world means we will have to face our feelings – so let's hide away! However, in the long run this tactic can add to and make our difficulties worse by (i) delaying the day we experience our feelings, and (ii) the isolation itself adds to the feelings it is intended to reduce.

Sometimes the enormity of emotions and feelings around loss can impact and influence other behaviours. We can become forgetful about everyday things, lose our appetite or comfort eat. Grief can make us need more or less sleep than normal, or have mood swings or snap at others. Grief can sap from us the energy and passion for things that used to give us pleasure, like hobbies.

Another physical manifestation of our feelings is crying. Sometimes, depending on how we are feeling, we sob, cry, scream, wail or sometimes stay silent. With so much emotional turmoil it can be hard for us to cope with everyday things and crying relieves some of the strain and tension that builds up inside us and helps us let go of pent-up emotions. Remember, we all need to cry now and again - it is natural to cry and unnatural not to. *'What soap is to the body, tears are to the soul'* –Jewish Proverb.

The intense feelings brought on by grieving can be absolutely draining, both physically and emotionally. While we can replenish our physical tank of energy with sleep each night, replenishing our emotional tank of energy tank takes more time. If our tank of emotional energy is depleted or empty, it can cause us to become angry and frustrated at minor issues that, if our emotional tank was full, we would be able to cope with normally. For example, we may get angry at everyday issues like having to do homework or chores at home or getting overly angry at simple everyday things like missing the bus or getting caught in the rain. In these situations it is important to identify the real source of our stress. If we are feeling cranky and narky when we miss the bus or get caught in the rain, we need to realise that it is not missing the bus that is causing us to feel that way. Our crankiness and narkiness is more likely due to the fact our tank of emotional energy has been greatly drained by trying to deal with our grief.

Furthermore, we can *displace* our feelings onto another person or situation. Getting angry at the late bus is an example of displacing our anger from one situation to another. Getting angry at a sibling or parent over, for example, our guilt at what we did or did not say to the person who has died, is an example of displacement onto another person. In these situations it is important to identify the real sources of our feelings. We need to ask ourselves, are we (i) displacing our feelings caused by one situation or person onto another situation or person, and/or (ii) are we displacing our feelings at minor issues or other issues when the real source of our stress is a bigger issue.

In the long term it is important for us to realise how our behaviours and interactions with others are been driven by our emotions. Such self-analysis is a healthy part of the grieving process and allows us to analyse our thoughts and feelings. Such self-exploration is necessary to allow us to begin a new and different phase in our lives with the person who has died not in our presence – but in our mind and heart.

4. Processing Our Feelings

When we are grieving we sometimes try to get rid of or bury our negative feelings or fix how we feel or try to make the pain go away. Everyone in the history of time who has tried this has not succeeded, simply because it does not work. It does not work because it does not address our needs at this traumatic time. The best thing we can do for ourselves is to pay attention to our feelings, listen to them, feel them, process them, express them, and understand them. And if needs be, do it all over again and again.

There are several ways to do this. We can paint, build something, go for long walks, listen to music, play sport, sit in silence, write to ourselves, write or talk to the person we have lost, or tell stories. Which one is the best one? The one that is right for you. While all of these are very healthy and helpful, there is another and more productive activity. That is *talking* - talking to someone who makes you feel comfortable. In the past, you may have heard someone say '*it is good to talk*'. This is too simplistic a statement. Prior to talking, other things are happening.

- i) We have to tap into our emotions and feelings.
- ii) We then understand our feelings.
- iii) We then find the words to describe them.
- iv) We then say the words.
- v) Finally, we begin to understand our feelings.

It is the presence of another person that makes us go through this process and it is the *process* that is important. This process can help us identify, understand and put meaning on our feelings. This is not a magic wand that gets rid of our feelings, but instead, helps us manage them. Understanding our feelings help us heal, and healing happens as we allow feelings to happen.

During any conversation about the person who has died we will inevitable talk about the person we have lost. This is normal and natural. However, don't forget to talk about *you*. In other words, talk about how *you* feel about the deceased, and how *you* feel about their life. Give time to talking about how *you* feel about their death and how *you* feel about your life without them. This processing of feelings allows us to work through our emotions, process them, understand them, and accept them. This allows healing and the strength of the human spirit to take hold. If you feel you need to talk, but would prefer a 'neutral', do not be afraid to seek professional help.

5. Why?

One aspect of death that can become very prominent for us when grieving is *why*. *'Why did this happen?', 'Why didn't someone stop it?', 'Why did God let this happen?', 'Why does the rest of the world keep going, do they not realise what has happened?,' 'Young people are not supposed to die. It's against the rules of nature. It's not right. It's not fair.'* These questions are particularly pertinent when the deceased is young.

Sometimes some of the questions we want answered do not have an answer. To continue to search for such answers can intensify our grief. We might just have to accept that sometimes there are questions in life we will never be able to answer and accept that we have to let these questions go. In other words, grief is one of life's experiences that makes us realise that some questions cannot, and do not, have answers. Acceptance of this may be a sign that we are adjusting to and processing our grief.

6. Previous Issues

Some of us, through our past experiences, may be less prepared than others for the psychological and emotional challenges of dealing with loss. Previous difficulties may result in the grieving process being intensified. Prior to the death, we may have been struggling with others issues. This struggle may have depleted our emotional tank of energy making us less able to cope with the emotional turmoil of grief.

In such a situation, we may think all our difficulties are about the loss of the person close to us. Indeed, the loss of the deceased is very difficult to cope with so go ahead and process those feelings. However, be open and alert to clues in what you are thinking, saying and doing. Are difficulties from previous stories becoming interwoven into the grief? This is more likely to happen if the past issues have not been dealt with effectively. Be attuned to this in your emotions and words and the stories you are telling.

These previous issues may be a previous loss where you did not grieve fully. For example, is a previous death mixed in with this one? Is the separation of parents or the loss of a friendship coming back to the surface? Other issues that may not be associated with previous loss may also surface. We all have some previous issues, so ask yourself are these issues making an appearance in our current difficulties.

7. Numbing The Pain

In some cases unexpressed feelings can be bottled up and result in excessive drinking or drug taking. This substance abuse can act as an anaesthetic and sooth our emotions in the immediate term. However this is storing up and multiplying and compounding our troubles. Over time, we need increasing amounts of alcohol or drugs or both to numb the pain. Eventually, what began as one problem, emotional pain, becomes two problems, (i) buried and unexpressed emotional pain and (ii) substance dependence.

If this is the case, do the following. Go home, take off the mask you have being showing everyone, look in the mirror, and admit to yourself that this is not the way you want your life to be. There is a part of you hidden away that wants you to have a normal healthy life. Allow this bit of you to have the strength to seek professional help.

Indeed, even if you are not misusing drink or drugs, there may be a times when we need to seek professional help. Are you burying you grief? Are you avoiding your feelings? Are you taking your feelings out on others over a long period of time? Is your grief stopping you getting on with life? If so, maybe it is now time to seek help.

8. Future Triggers

The myriad of feelings encountered in grief can resurface at particular times, for example birthdays, Christmas, and anniversaries. Other, more subtle, experiences such as songs, smells, places, words, jokes, sporting fixtures, and journeys, can also trigger our minds to re-experience the pain of our loss. These events can suddenly and unexpectedly bring our feelings back to a level of intensity that occurred immediately after the death. This is normal and to be expected and can be seen to be an important phase in the grieving process and indeed necessary to adapt to our new life without the person who has died.

9. Normalising Activities

It is important for us to return to normalising activities. This may include hobbies such as sport, drama, scouts, music or socialising. It is also important to return to normal school life. Returning to school is not about algebra or Hamlet. Algebra and Hamlet do not matter at this time and can wait. Indeed, returning to school for academic reasons is not why we should return to school. We should return to school because the schedule and routine of school life is a very helpful part of emerging into a new phase of the grieving process. School provides us with an activity that makes us feel normal, helps us see life is still going on, and helps us engage in an integral part of normal everyday life. Indeed, returning to school helps us begin to develop a new and different normal without the deceased.

There may be a number of anxieties that we can have about returning to school. These may include, (i) being singled out, (ii) being treated differently, (iii) being 'crowded out' by mates, (iv) breaking down in public, (v) being asked emotional questions in public. Talk to the school. Schools can put in place systems to relieve these anxieties. They have done this before and they know what to do.

In the turmoil of grief it may be tempting to make big decisions like giving up a hobby or changing school. We need to ask ourselves, will the difficulties we have now still be there if hobbies are ceased? Will the difficulties encountered in our current school still be there if we change school? Are 'other issues' prompting hobbies being dropped and/or a desire to change school? Are the hobbies or the current school being used as a displacement to dump our 'other issues'?

Following a bereavement some people engage in a new activity. These activities can include fund-raising, volunteering for a charity, helping others or even getting fit. These activities can be a wonderful thing to do if they are helping us process our grief. However, if we are using these activities as a distraction and these activities are preventing us from working through our grief, in the long run, this is not helpful particularly if these activities become very dominant or even oppressive.

10. A Different Normal

It is worth repeating the following. Grief is not an illness that needs to be cured. It's not a task with definable, sequential steps. It's not a bridge to cross, a burden to bear, or an experience to 'recover' from. It is a normal, healthy and predictable response to loss. Grief is not a disorder, a disease, or sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical, and spiritual necessity; it is the price we pay for love. When we are grieving we do not need to be *fixed* nor do they need to be *taught* how to grieve, but rather, *allow* ourselves to grieve and to make our own meaning of our new world without the deceased. There is no set schedule for grief and no timetable for how long it will hurt. Grieving does not go in a straight line and sometimes it may do a U-turn. Grief is a process not an event and mourning our loss is hard work, hard emotional work. We need to walk through grief, not run. Everybody experiences grief in their lifetime and eventually we all learn to adapt to our different life without the person who has passed away. The only way to deal with grief is to grieve.

We don't get over our loss, we adapt to it as space between the pain gets greater and the pain becomes less intense. Time does not completely heal our broken heart; it only teaches us how to live with it. After we have suffered a loss we will more than likely manage to survive and adapt and go on to live happy lives. We will eventually find an appropriate place for our thoughts and memories of our loved one. We eventually renegotiate our relationship with them. We reorganise our life with the deceased playing a different role in our mind and in our heart. We realise, that when they were alive we did not think about them all of the time so we don't have to think about them all the time now that they are dead. We begin to realise that we don't have to measure the love we have for the deceased by the amount of time we think about them or the amount of tears we shed, or the level of sadness we have. We slowly learn to think of the deceased without pain. As we slowly begin to realise that they are only a thought away, our wound slowly closes up, leaving a healed scar.

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