

# Grief and Mourning

Whatever your relationship with your elder, be the person a parent, relative, friend or patient, grief upon their death is inevitable. You and everyone around you will be going through a period of mourning that can last a year or more. Accepting grief as a normal reaction to a death of someone close to you is the first stage in healing.

What your grief is like will depend on your personality and the relationship that you had with the person who has died. You may experience a sense of loss, despair or despondency. If your elder has gone through a long, protracted illness, you may even experience relief. All of these can be normal reactions, and they will take some time to run their course.

## Stages of Grief

Grief and mourning follow a fairly predictable cycle, although the time you spend in each stage and how each affects you will vary.



**IMMEDIATE EFFECTS:** Your first reaction to a death may be denial, disbelief and shock; you might be unable to accept the death, or unable to understand it. You may become disoriented, unusually distant or hyperactive. You may also be unable to sleep and—because your immune system weakens during grief—physically sick. All of these reactions, and combinations of them, are normal.

**CONTINUING PAIN AND ANGER:** In the weeks and months after the death, you may still be unable to resume everything that you were doing before the death. It may take a while before you feel entirely yourself. Try to avoid taking on unnecessary stress or activities during this time; though the rest of the world might expect you to be back on your feet, you are still recovering.

**LETTING GO:** During this stage, the acute pain of the loss is gone, although you may still feel some numbness and depression. At this time, you begin to say good-bye to your loved one, accepting that they are gone.

**MOVING FORWARD:** Finally, life begins to return to normal; your grieving process is done, and you can move on. You will still have memories of your loved one, but you will feel sorrow only occasionally.

## Growth

Grief is not an entirely negative process; in fact, you and your family may grow during the grieving process in ways that you could not have predicted. Here are a few ways that you and your family might grow:

- Your family structure may change.
- You may experience an increased sense of independence.
- You will begin to confront your own mortality.
- Being relieved of caregiving duties will give you more time and energy.
- Experiencing the death may help you to reevaluate your priorities.

## Children and Grief

Prepare your children by giving them consistent loving care and support. Make sure your child doesn't feel at fault. Explain your spiritual beliefs about the cycle of life and death in simple words. Giving them words to use in talking about death is a first step to helping them understand. The most important thing for a young child to know is that someone will always be there to take care of them. You should also explain the ways that your family or community grieves. Is there a funeral, a wake, a celebration of life? Children are comforted in knowing how they fit into the routines and customs.

Some children may not exhibit grief at all. Others may have difficulty with death and may fear the death of their own parent or themselves. If this is evident, consider having your child see a child psychologist, social worker or counselor experienced in working with grieving children. Sometimes a few sessions of play therapy may help a child express their feelings and the physical pains go away.

Children should not be shielded from the sad feelings of grieving adults. It is important for your child to know you are sad, but if you are unable to attend to your child's needs because of that sadness, seek professional help for both of you.