

SENIOR INFORMATION & ASSISTANCE

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Responses to Grief

Grief causes tremendous turmoil in every aspect of life and involves a wide range of physical, emotional, and spiritual responses. Many people find themselves overwhelmed and frightened by the feelings, thoughts and emotions. Although it seems difficult, healing takes place sooner if a person allows him/herself to experience the feelings as they arise, rather than pretending everything is okay.

Following are stages of grief from Kubler-Ross and Robert Kavanaugh. These stages are part of the natural healing process necessary in recovery from any loss, no matter how large or small. Be aware that these stages don't always occur in the order listed and that feelings may swing back and forth from one stage to another.

| Kubler-Ross | Robert Kavanaugh |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| Shock | Shock, Denial |
| Denial | Disorganization |
| Anger | Volatile Emotions |
| Bargaining | Guilt |
| Depression | Loss and Loneliness |
| Acceptance | Relief |
| | Reestablishment, Reorganization |

Common characteristics of normal grieving:

Physical

Reactions to grief can cause physical symptoms. Our bodies "feel" the emotional loss. Many older people actually will hurt rather than complain of emotional pain.

- Knot in the stomach
- Changes in appetite
- Tightness or lump in throat
- Frequent sighing
- Shortness of breath
- Tightness in chest
- Fatigue or lack of energy
- Muscle weakness
- Dry mouth
- Nausea, diarrhea, indigestion
- Feeling "hollow" or "emptied out"
- Feeling weak or faint
- Headaches
- General achiness
- Over-sensitivity to noise

Behavioral

- Being immobilized, or unable to act.
- Restless over activity (unable to sit still)
- Forgetfulness
- Sleeplessness or oversleeping
- Lack of motivation or energy
- Unable to begin and maintain normal daily activity
- Crying, sobbing at unexpected times
- Talking to the person who has died
- Social withdrawal

Feelings

- Shock, numbness, disbelief, anxiety, panic, anger, guilt, intense sadness.

*Adapted from "Loss and Grief in Later Life" by V. L. Schmall, A Pacific NW Extension Publication

Things to remember in dealing with your grief:

1. Verbalize your feelings associated with your loss.
2. Tell the story of the loss.
3. Read books
 - Good Grief - Westburg
 - How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong - Snedes
 - How to Survive the Loss of a Love - Colgrove
 - When Bad Things Happen to Good People – Kushner
 - On Death and Dying – Kubler-Ross
 - The Courage to Grieve – Tatelbaum
4. Write a letter to your lost loved one describing how you feel. Read that letter to a friend or counselor.
5. Write about your loss with a special focus on the last contact with the person.
6. Keep a daily grief journal.
7. List ways that avoidance of grieving has negatively impacted your life.
8. See your doctor to keep in good physical health.
9. Watch your finances, as you are vulnerable at this time. Seek counseling from a financial planner if needed.
10. Don't make any major changes/decisions until a year has passed following the death.
11. Remember that the low periods will gradually decrease in intensity and frequency, and that you will begin to feel better in a few months.
12. Seek professional counseling if you feel "stuck" after many months.