

Dealing with Grief

Grieving is the hardest thing that any human can go through.

Grieving is usually associated with death, but in fact can be brought on by any life change – moving house, change of employment, abuse, loss of dreams or money, separation, leaving home, children leaving home etc etc!

This booklet may help you understand your extreme emotions and reactions to your loss.



The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord look upon you with kindness and give you peace. (Numbers 6:24-26)

Everyone responds to grief in **different ways**. There is no right way and no wrong way to grieve. Some people just sit and think; some express their feelings aloud either in the presence of others or alone; some write their thoughts and feelings down (either keeping them or throwing them away), some work (sweat) it out in physical activity. The best way to grieve is your way – according to your personality; the ways grieving has been modelled in your past especially in your formative years; your previous experiences of grief; your support networks; the faith framework with which you operate.

One important factor in grieving is to realise that your reactions, thoughts and feelings are yours; they are **natural for you** and should not be denied. One area where people can go wrong with grief is that they think there's something wrong with how they are reacting to the grief. Usually our reactions are quite normal. However, if we think a particular reaction or sets of thoughts or feelings just won't go away for an extended period, it may be wise to seek some help. Another area where people can go wrong with grief is to try to deny it; to hide it – the problem is that by denying grief we bury it alive. It simply sits there, eating away at us deep down and waiting to re-surface at future times.



May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 15:13

Take time to grieve. Allow your thoughts and feelings to surface. Own them as natural and unique to you. Don't try to avoid your thoughts and feelings with over-activity or when they arise, to immediately busy yourself. Spend time with your grief. Acknowledge that grieving is hard work.

While each one of us grieves in different ways, those who have studied grieving have identified a number of common stages of grief. There is some variation amongst the researchers, but there's a lot of similarity. The material I'm using here is predominantly from a writer called Howard Stone.

THE STAGES OF GRIEF

- ◆ Each stage is not clearly defined. In other words, one doesn't conclude before the next commences. There is often overlap.
- ◆ One stage may not sequentially follow the other. They can jump around, and you may well experience several stages twice. However, through the process there's a good chance you'll identify the seven stages listed here at different times.
- ◆ The seven stages can be present at the beginning of the grief and then are worked through at a slower pace in the ensuing months. Often the first anniversaries without a loved bring a lot of things to the fore – the first birthdays (the one who's passed away and yours), the first wedding anniversary (if you are a remaining spouse), the first Christmas and Easter and the first anniversary of the death itself.



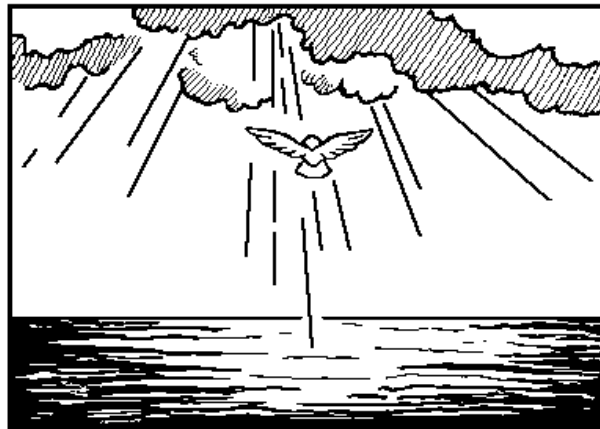
1. SHOCK

This is just being overwhelmed by what's happened. Part of it is feeling numb and depleted. It's so hard to believe. We can find ourselves making comments like, 'It's just a bad dream; it can't be true'. Sometimes the thoughts and feelings just flood; then there are none. In shock, people sort of move automatically – the mind is numb, the thinking fuzzy and movements measured, almost robotic. It can be hard to eat, sleep and concentrate.

2. *CATHARSIS*

This is a technical term for the release of emotions, usually in crying. It could also show itself in lumps in the throat, deep breathing, trembling of the voice. Where possible, let these feelings flow, especially in your own privacy. To deny this stage can slow up the grief process and even stop us proceeding to the next stage.

Part of our Australian culture is to think that grown men especially don't cry. This is a myth and creates more problems than it solves. Sometimes little things can set us off – a passing thought, something somebody said, something we read or see or hear, a special location. Wherever possible, without significant



Those who drink of the
water that I will give them
will never be thirsty.

- John 4:14

embarrassment to yourself or to another person, let the tears and the emotions flow. It's part of the healing process. It removes toxins from the system. It's a release and a relief.

Sometimes at funerals we can think how strong people are because they aren't crying. Maybe they are still at the shock stage. At other times at funerals we can think people are going to pieces because they are crying a lot. Maybe they have reached the necessary catharsis stage.

Already at this stage, it's important to start taking the steps to return to your life without your loved one – getting out of the house, doing the things you used to do, attending the groups you used to attend, going to church, etc. Later on, you may wish to branch out and try things you haven't tried before as well.

3. DEPRESSION

This is a natural reaction to the expenditure of a lot of emotion in the early stages of grief. This can show itself in a loss of energy, of interest in life and of care for oneself. Self pity and a desire for attention from others can accompany this stage. This stage can also lead to a loss of self confidence. While it is not easy to do, this is the stage to start taking some personal initiative. Sitting on the pity pot, as the saying goes, only makes us inactive. It can be helpful at this stage to think of the times you enjoyed with your loved one, to thank God for the times you had together, to re-live some of your experiences and to start thinking more about your own future.



4. GUILT

This can accompany the previous stage where we get down on ourselves. Things can come back from our past – the wrong things we did and the right things we didn't do; the things we said and should not have said or the things we should not have said and did. It can be the 'If only' stage – if only this or if only that, but we can't change things now. We can no longer say 'Sorry' to that person or change the situation. We can feel helpless. Guilt can be hard to deal with ourselves. It's only in knowing that there's a loving and forgiving God who's paid for

our guilt on the cross with the death of Jesus that we can truly deal with our guilt.

5. *PREOCCUPATION WITH THE LOSS*



This is a stage where we just can't help thinking about the one we've lost. We think about times we've had together, we can visualise the little mannerisms, etc. This is a time to savour the memories, but not to get fixated on them. This is a time to start focusing forward and not just looking back. It can also be a time

where we can start talking about the one we've lost without the intensity of the emotions of the catharsis stage.

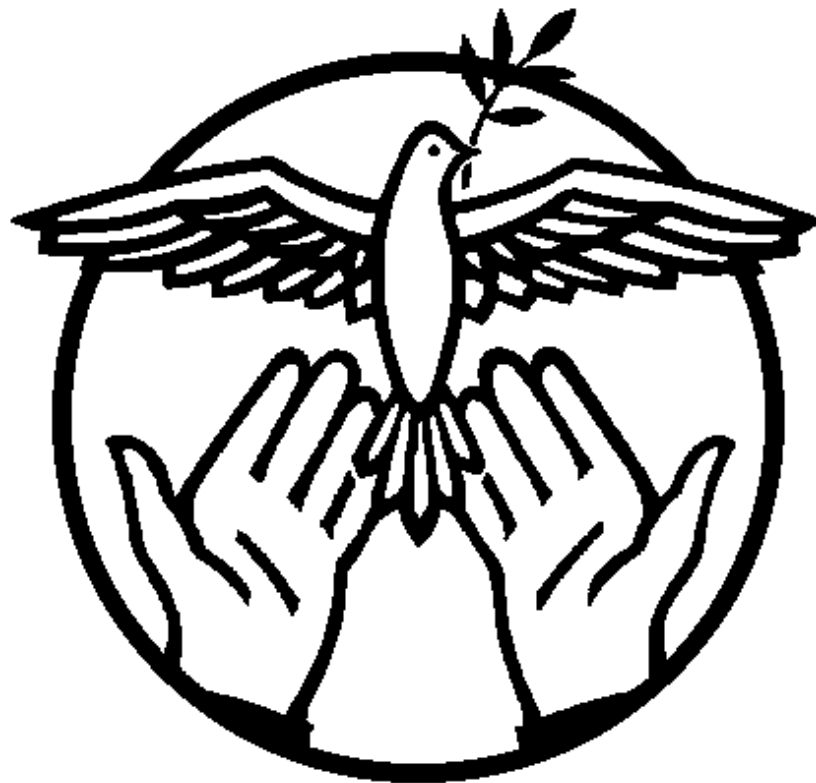
6. *ANGER*

Anger is a wide-ranging feeling. It can express itself in a marked critical attitude to others and to our own circumstances. Sometimes the anger can be directed to circumstances surrounding the death. Sometimes it can be directed to people, for example, to medical staff; to other caring people like the clergy and other church people; to friends and relatives for what they did or didn't do. Sometimes anger can be directed to the ultimate one – to God himself. In some ways anger is a good thing. Energies are starting to return. It takes energy to get angry, but then again, it's not healthy to stay angry.

7. *ADAPTING TO THE NEW SITUATION*

Over time, often with going through those first anniversaries, the thoughts and feelings are less intense and less frequent. We again reach the point of being at peace with ourselves and our situation despite what has happened. However, the feelings and the loss are still present and, naturally, remain a part of us for the rest of our lives.

Along the pathway of grief, avail yourself of help from various people – family members, trusted friends, church community and perhaps professional people including your pastor. A number of organisations exist to help us deal with our grief. Some of these organisations help us with specific grief situations – for example – stillborn children, road accidents, other untimely deaths. Many other fine resources are available including booklets from the funeral directors you have chosen.



May God give you his strength to deal with your grief; may you learn a lot about yourself as you experience your grief; may you, in time, be able to help others through their grief; may you end up a stronger person and may you continue to know and live the promise of eternal life which is ours through Christ Jesus.

Prepared by Pastor Mel Mueller, Senior Pastor at Everton Hills Lutheran Church 2000-2005. Mel died in May 2005

GRIEF IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Children are humans too! They fear, hurt and grieve just like you do. The first instinct of a parent is to protect children from hurt and grief – but this may not be the best way forward. Children and young people deserve the truth. They will want to talk about death and, usually, the details of death. This is healthy and natural.

Children have less experience and control to draw on than adults; and so are more likely to work through their grief through their actions and behaviour. Sleeplessness, dreams, bedwetting, poor concentration, slipping grades would all be normal responses to grief.

Funerals, and even viewings of the deceased, can help children process their emotions. Children are usually more tactile than adults, and require more of a ‘hands on’ approach to grieving.

Children also tend to grieve in short spurts – so don’t be concerned if your child isn’t grieving when you are.

Encourage them to draw pictures, and encourage them to discuss their feelings openly. Don’t discourage them if you find them processing their emotions and their experiences through play – this is healthy. Reassure them with hugs and stories. Prayer is very reassuring to a grieving child.



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