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About this eBook

Part 1 of this eBook describes grief and mourning and explains why we grieve and mourn, what is healthy grieving and mourning and what is unhealthy grieving and mourning.

Part 2 explains the phases of feelings experienced as grief is processed, from the initial shock until acceptance of the new circumstances of life resulting from the death or other significant loss is reached.

The information in this eBook will help individuals and families who are in grief and mourning and those involved in supporting them to:

- understand that grief and mourning are natural human responses to death and other significant loss
- realise that the importance of recognising, acknowledging and validating the feelings experienced when in grief and mourning
- realise that unhealthy grief and/or mourning keeps us stuck in the past and has debilitating effects on our lives
- realise that by going through the process of grief and mourning in a healthy way we become stronger and more compassionate
- help those in grief and mourning to process in a healthy way through the debilitating effects of grief towards accepting the new circumstances of life resulting from the death or other significant loss.

The information contained in this eBook was gathered from:

- the author's extensive research on the subject of grief and mourning
- interactions with various organisations in the field of death, loss, grief and bereavement
- the author's personal experience of grief and mourning.

Also included are comments and opinions based on the author's many years of direct involvement in the field of grief and bereavement support.

Part 1 – Grief and mourning

Understanding Grief

Grief is a process that we go through when we lose a loved one through death, or when we suffer any significant loss in our lives.

We go through phases of grief by every loss we experience. The more significant the loss is and the more resistance we have to accepting it, the harder it is to progress through the phases of grief.

Some of the more obvious phases, not necessarily in any particular order, include:

- denial
- anger
- bargaining
- guilt
- depression
- and eventually acceptance.

Recognising and validating the feelings experienced when we grieve allows us to eventually reach acceptance of the loss and come to the realisation that we have to keep on living in a healthy way without the person or significant thing we have lost.

How we respond to loss

We respond to death and major losses in the same way as we have learned to respond to other difficult transitions in life. If we were not allowed to express our fears as children after a significant loss, it is difficult for us to show emotion later in life when we experience the death of a loved one or another significant loss.

Examples of responses to loss

Eg. A child left at school or kindergarten on the first day is expected to 'be a big boy or girl' and not express the fear or any sense of abandonment they are feeling by crying or clinging to mum or dad.

Eg. An adolescent moving from the security of primary school to start secondary school. Now, in the youngest class in a larger school, the adolescent may be experiencing a sense of excitement mixed with a natural fear of the unknown. But rather than risk the ridicule of family members or peers, he or she does not express feelings of fear and nervousness.

These examples illustrate that if feelings are not expressed and validated, what we learn is to deny having feelings of fear, nervousness or anxiety when faced with loss later in life.

Eg. Telling a child whose pet dog has died, 'never mind, we can get a new puppy'.

Eg. Telling a couple who have lost a baby through miscarriage or stillbirth that, 'It's not so bad. You are still young and can have other babies'.

Such unsympathetic attitudes, as in the examples above, teach us that when we experience the death of a loved one or any other significant loss, we should repress our painful feelings and 'be strong'.

Eg. At some funeral services, we may hear comments like, 'she or he is taking it so well' because they did not break down.

This example reinforces the attitude of denying our true feelings instead of acknowledging and validating them.

Increasing awareness of the affects of loss

Fortunately, in recent years we have become more aware of the need to acknowledge and express the pain and sorrow we experienced when a loved one dies or when we have another significant loss. There is more awareness also of how loss affects individuals and communities. Understanding the natural human reaction to loss, and validating the painful feelings associated with the loss, enables us to grieve and mourn so that we can make the transition from the suffering caused by the loss, to accepting it and learning to continue living our life in a healthy way.

Understanding Mourning

To mourn is to experience feelings of grief when lamenting the death of a loved one. Both grief and mourning are personal and individual experiences:

- **Grief** relates mainly to deep-seated internal feelings
- **Mourning** includes the external signs of grief.

External expressions of mourning vary between cultures and religions. Each person's culture and religion has its own rituals that are followed when in mourning. In some cultures it is not uncommon for the family members of the deceased to observe a period of mourning after the death. During this time they are expected to withdraw from social activities and behave in a restrained and subdued manner. In some cases during the period of mourning family members dress in dark clothing, wear distinctive black caps or veils and/or special mourning jewellery.

External public and communal expressions of mourning

Examples of external expressions of mourning which serve to alert others to the fact that the mourners are in a vulnerable stage of grief and that any interactions with them require extra understanding, patience and compassion.