

Coping With Grief and Loss

Experiencing the death or loss of someone you care about is painful and often what follows are a mix of emotions that may feel confusing and/or overwhelming. Frequently, people may wonder if these feelings are “normal” or acceptable. It can be helpful to understand that we all deal with grief and loss differently. Your relationship with the person you lost is uniquely your own and thus your grief is your own and cannot be compared to anyone else. Below is a list of some common, natural grief responses that may help in terms of knowing what to expect and/or being able to identify some of your reactions related to grief. Allowing yourself to experience these reactions despite how difficult they may feel may aid the natural course of your grief. You may identify with some of these and others you may not. Again, each grief response is unique.

Common Reactions to Grief and Loss

Physical Reactions	Cognitive Reactions	Emotional Reactions	Behavioral Reactions
Fatigue or Exhaustion	Difficulty concentrating	Sadness	Crying
Headaches	Difficulty making decisions	Shock/numbness	Need to talk
Nausea	Memory difficulties	Helplessness	Withdrawal
Lump in throat	Dreams and/or Nightmares	Anxiety	Avoidance of topic/feelings
Empty feeling in stomach	Thinking things will never be “normal”	Fear	Low motivation
Muscle tension	Questions about life and death	Regret	Loss of interest in usual activities
Digestion problems	Asking “why?”	Guilt	Wish to be with others
Sense the person’s presence	Wishing you could take things back or “trade” something to change things	Detachment, “surreal” feelings	Sleep changes: sleeping more or sleeping less
	Preoccupation with loss	Irritability	Appetite changes: eating more or eating less
	Memories of past deaths or losses	Anger	Remembering
		Denial	
		Feeling alone	
		Confusion	

Discussion Question: What experiences have you had related to loss? What was most challenging and what helped you the most through this process?

Though these reactions to grief are common and part of the healing process, they can often be difficult to cope with. Following are some strategies that may help you to manage and deal with your grief responses. You may experiment with these strategies, trying and practicing what works for you and disregarding what doesn’t fit or isn’t helpful. Keep in mind that it may take some time using these strategies to help you manage your grief process. Healing lies in being able to experience your grief response and these strategies are aimed at helping you to better tolerate your grief reactions.

Strategies for Coping With Grief and Loss

1. Allow yourself to experience your feelings; don't ignore or stuff them.
2. At the same time, some breaks or distractions from your feelings so you are not flooded or overwhelmed by them may also be helpful.
3. Take the time you need to take care of yourself. This may include returning home, taking time away from classes, work, etc.
4. Attend and participate in ceremonies and/or rituals that observe and honor the passing of your loved one.
5. Talk about the loss and your feelings and experience with others, if culturally permissible. This may help to decrease feelings of isolation and loneliness.
6. Likewise, spend time with others. This may include attending Talk Circle or a Grief Support group offered by Counseling & Psychological Services.
7. Try to get enough sleep and rest.
8. Try to eat regular meals and snacks.
9. Do things that feel good to you. You may reference activities that typically are self-soothing to you such as journaling, prayer, meditation, attending sweat ceremonies, warm baths or showers, listening to music, watching humorous videos, art, exercise, spending time with your family or children.
10. Try to avoid making any big life changes. The loss you experienced already represents a significant change.
11. Beware of avoiding the pain through the use of drugs or alcohol.
12. When you feel ready, return to your routine that may provide some structure and a sense of some control over your daily life.
13. Schedule an appointment at Counseling & Psychological Services to talk with a therapist.

Grief Responses in which it may be especially helpful to talk to a professional therapist:

1. Your reactions are so intense or distressing that you find it difficult to function (e.g., sleep, eat, attend class, engage in your relationships).
2. Your feelings and reactions to grief have intensified over weeks or months.
3. You are experiencing anxiety or depression.
4. You are experiencing compounding reactions from past loss, grief, and/or trauma.
5. You have thoughts of death or suicide.

Campus Resources

Counseling & Psychological Services: For counseling and consultation services.

Phone: 994-4531 Location: 211 Swingle (above Student Health Services)

Dean of Students Office: For academic support and/or leave.

Phone: 994-2826 Location: SUB 174

American Indian/Alaska Native Student Success Office: For consultation services and referrals.

Richard White

Francine Spang-Willis

Rita Wilson

Phone: 994-4880

Phone: 994-5529

Phone: 994- 3334

Location: Wilson 01

Location: Wilson 1-155

Location: Wilson 01