

The Spiral of Grief Part 1:

Understanding the Grief Process

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When someone we love very much dies, our reaction to that death—our grief—reaches into every part of our lives.

Our emotions, our thoughts, our beliefs, our physical sensations and our behaviors are affected.

Although most of us will experience some mixture of these effects, they don't occur in any set order of "stages," and there is no particular endpoint or "graduation" from the journey of grief.

What we have seen over and over at the Caring Place is that after a death, people spiral in and out of these feelings, thoughts, and expressions of grief over the weeks, months and years following the death.

We've seen as well that grief is often larger—more difficult and longer lasting—than most people imagined it would be.

But what we have also seen is that hope and healing are possible, especially when the grieving person is able to find support.



Shock

Immediately after the death of someone who is loved very much, many people feel a sense of shock. You feel like you're walking in a fog—like you're taking part in a nightmare, waiting to wake up. Nothing seems real. Or that you're going through the motions, spectators to the actions going on around you, actions which you can't quite grab hold of.

Many of us find ourselves saying or thinking, "I can't believe this is happening to me."

"It was kind of a whirlwind. Your mind logically can say 'This is what happened,' but your heart is saying, 'No, no, no, it's not real, it's not real.'"

—Chris

Mother of two whose husband and son died

Over time, the fog comes and goes, seems to clear up a bit, and now—where are we? What is this landscape we're looking out on? It's not clear, but one thing that does become clear the more we see of it—it's not the same familiar landscape that we were used to seeing.

Realizing that the road ahead is a completely new one, and that there is no road map for grief, can be frightening and disorienting.

"Once I began this process, I had no idea how I was going to proceed. It was like going blindly down a road that I had never been on before."

Devastation

When someone close to us dies, part of our world disappears as well. “My life collapsed,” a young mother said after her husband died. A twelve-year-old, looking back on the death of his father, said, “It felt like somebody dropped a nuclear bomb on my life.” These images of being totally overwhelmed are common.

The death of someone close is overwhelming and devastating.

The death has uprooted the lives of those who remain, shaken the family to its foundations and left cracks that can't be fixed.

The life that once was will not return. As a young mother put it, “After someone you love dies, you find your life is like a jigsaw puzzle that's been scattered all over the floor. Over time, you work on putting it back together—and you find that some pieces are missing and gone forever.”

“I didn't feel like I was a person anymore. I felt really incomplete, like I was missing from the world.”

—Scott, 18
whose father died

Anxiety and Fear

There is an understandable fear of the unknown after being faced with this new world we're trying to get through.

Like people who have gone through some natural disaster, there is a deep feeling that the world isn't really a safe place after all.

For children, especially, this fear is compounded. You can imagine how deeply this worry cuts in a young person who is powerless to make the world safe by himself or herself.

They also worry that if one person in the family could die, then what about the remaining parent or parents—can't they die too? And then of course, if that happens, who will take care of me?

This fear doesn't go away any time soon. It keeps coming back, over and over. Whether the fear is expressed or not, children and adults who have suffered the death of a family member live with heightened levels of anxiety, worry and fear, sometimes for many years after the death.

“I was scared. And I was scared to tell anyone I was scared. I was scared to go on, scared to grow up. I couldn't imagine how I could go on without my Dad.”

—Megan, 15
whose father died



Feeling Alone

Many grieving adults and children speak of feeling alone and isolated. They speak of feeling weird, different from their peers, of knowing no one else who has had a death in their family.

Soon enough, after family and friends stop coming by, stop calling to check in on us, stop dropping off dinners or cards or offers of help, an emptiness seems to settle in. The people who have been around aren't around anymore. We feel alone and lonely.

Even more, it feels like nobody understands what we're going through. *We* hardly understand what we're going through. So how could anybody else? And yet, the ones we thought we could count on seem to understand so little of what is really happening. They just don't get it.

People seem so uncomfortable too. They don't know what to say. All they can think about is the death, as if that is our main identity now—widow, or widower, orphan, survivor. But they can't talk about it. They don't want to bring it up. As if that would remind us of something that we're not already thinking about every day anyway.

Children and adults also find it difficult to talk to the rest of the family. Often, we don't want to upset the other members of the family by bringing up thoughts or memories that are sad. We don't want to make them cry. And they feel the same about us.

And so we often end up feeling profoundly alone in the darkness.

Grief Is Normal, Grief Is Love

In addition to feeling alone, to feeling afraid, to not knowing where we're going, we also don't know which of all these feelings and experiences are normal and which might be very far from normal. Many of us in grief speak of feeling like we're going crazy.

When someone is dying, part of us is dying. When someone has died, part of us has died, and life will never be the same. We are not crazy. We are grieving.

Grief is a complex process. It is not a single feeling or experience. It's a mixture of many feelings, thoughts and reactions swirling together.

Grief is natural and normal. The pain of a broken heart is a normal, healthy response to loss.

It is a response to loving and losing someone we loved—someone we love still. Grief is not a disease. Grief is as natural as eating when we're hungry, drinking when we're thirsty, sleeping when we're tired.

Grief is nature's way of healing a broken heart.

Grief is the name of the road that must be traveled after the death of a loved one.

Grief is the other side of the coin of love.

“Grief is love never, ever ready
to say goodbye.”

—Rabbi Dr. Earl Grollman

About the Highmark Caring Place

The Highmark Caring Place is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of grieving children.

It is the Mission of the Highmark Caring Place:

- To raise awareness of the needs of grieving children
- To provide programs to address those needs
- To equip the community to support those children who have experienced the death of a loved one



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