How to Cope with Grief and Loss

Losing someone or something you love is very painful. After a significant loss, you may experience all kinds of difficult and surprising emotions, such as shock, anger, and guilt. Sometimes it may feel like the sadness will never let up. While these feelings can be frightening and overwhelming, they are normal reactions to loss. Accepting them as part of the grieving process and allowing yourself to feel what you feel is necessary for healing. There is no right or wrong way to grieve — but there are healthy ways to cope with the pain. The following are some suggestions of healthy coping techniques you can utilize to best care for yourself during this difficult time:

♦ **Get support.** Now is the time to lean on the people who care about you, even if you take pride in being strong and self-sufficient. Talk to friends and family, join a grief support group, and/or call a mental health professional who can help you work through your intense emotions and overcome obstacles to your grieving. If you follow a religious tradition, embrace the comfort its mourning rituals can provide. If you’re questioning your faith in the wake of the loss, talk to a clergy member or others in your religious community. Take this time to utilize any and all resources that help you to feel safe and supported.

♦ **Take care of your physical health.** When you’re grieving, it’s more important than ever to take care of your body. The stress of a major loss can quickly deplete your energy and emotional reserves. The mind and body are connected. When you feel good physically, you’ll also feel better emotionally. Combat stress and fatigue by getting enough sleep, eating right, and exercising. Don’t use alcohol or drugs to numb the pain of grief or lift your mood artificially.

♦ **Express your emotions.** Although it may be difficult and painful to face your feelings during this time, doing so is absolutely essential in the healing process that follows grief and loss. Trying to avoid your difficult emotions can prolong the grieving process and result in unresolved grief, which can then lead to complications such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and health problems. Find creative or tangible ways to express your emotions - Write about your loss in a journal; write a letter to your loved one saying the things you never got to say; make a scrapbook or photo album celebrating the person’s life; or get involved in a cause or organization that was important to him or her.

♦ **Allow yourself to feel what you’re feeling.** Your grief is your own and you have a right to whatever emotions you may be experiencing. It’s okay to be angry, to yell at the heavens, to cry or not to cry. It’s also okay to laugh, to find moments of joy, and to let go when you’re ready. Don’t allow others to tell you what to feel or when you should “move on” or “get over it.”

♦ **Plan ahead for grief “triggers.”** Anniversaries, holidays, and milestones can reawaken memories and feelings. Be prepared to experience some intense emotion during these times, and know that it’s completely normal. If you’re sharing a holiday or lifecycle event with other relatives, talk to them ahead of time about their expectations and agree on strategies to honor the person you loved.

♦ **Know when to seek professional help.** The sadness of losing someone you love never goes away completely, but it shouldn’t remain center stage. If the pain of the loss is so constant and severe that it keeps you from resuming your life, contact a mental health professional who can help you to identify and work through any barriers you may still be facing in your healing process.