

# *How to Handle Loss*

by Marc Sanders, Ph.D.

The most painful and difficult challenges in life involve loss. As we grow older, we experience many losses along the way: possessions, jobs, pets, health, relationships, moving, and death.

Each time we experience a new loss, the experience of earlier losses can return, often making the present loss all the more distressing. Therefore, we must handle each loss with care and attention.

Grief is the natural way we handle loss and it is unique to everyone. Although people express their grief in different ways, they often experience similar feelings and reactions.

As the person suffering a loss or as a person caring for someone who has suffered a loss, you should be aware of these reactions, which can be extremely helpful in understanding what is happening after a loss has occurred.

For example, people who have lost something or someone commonly experience an array of mental, emotional, physical, and social changes. Following are some common reactions, all of which are natural and normal grief responses.

## MENTAL/EMOTIONAL CHANGES

### Fear

- of being alone
- of going crazy

### Sadness

### Guilt

- for things not done or said
- for not having prevented the loss

### Anger

- at whomever caused or allowed the loss to happen
- with people who don't understand

### Obsessive Memories

- of what has been lost

### Questioning

- of spiritual and/or religious beliefs
- the meaning of life

### PHYSICAL CHANGES

- sleep disturbances
- irritability
- difficulty concentrating
- changes in appetite
- body aches and pains

### SOCIAL CHANGES

- tension with co-workers, partners, and friends
- difficulty feeling understood by others
- concerns of burdening others
- feeling that others seem annoyed and impatient.

Social support is an important factor in how people recover from loss. For many, the support of friends, family, and/or care-givers can be enough to assist the grieving process along. However, for others, the lack of support or the intensity of the physical and emotional reactions can indicate the need for professional help.

Some professional alternatives include individual and group psychotherapy (many groups have themes specific to the type of loss), and psychiatric evaluation. Ultimately, handling loss is about understanding the grieving process and creating the time for the grieving process to happen.

### FOR THOSE WHO HAVE SUFFERED A LOSS

- Remember there is no “right” way to grieve and no set time frame.
- Be open to letting others help by talking about what you are experiencing.
- Expect ups and downs as you go through the grieving process.

- **Avoid using alcohol or drugs to feel better.**
- **Don't expect the memories and feelings to go away too quickly.**
- **Don't make any big life decisions or changes.**
- **Seek professional help when the grief seems unbearable (e.g. support groups and/or individual therapy).**

### **HELPING SOMEONE WHO HAS SUFFERED A LOSS**

- **Encourage them to talk about their thoughts, feelings, and memories.**
- **Encourage healthy behaviors, such as, eating regularly and exercise.**
- **Avoid reassuring comments, such as, "look at the bright side." *People who are grieving simply want to be heard and understood.***
- **Provide practical support, such as, planning meals, contacting friends and relatives, driving, paying bills, etc.**
- **Allow them to experience their feelings, no matter how painful the feelings might seem. Grieving is a painful process.**
- **Encourage professional help when there is excessive pain and more support is needed.**

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