

## Coping with Loss

All changes are a loss. Loss can be major such as a death, or the separation of partners, or it can be more subtle, such as a change in career or another type of transition. There seems to be a common pattern in human experience after a change or a loss.

### Why do I feel different from the others?

Do not be surprised if those around you are experiencing the loss or change in ways that are different from you. Some people may be crying, distraught, physically churning inside and feel as if they are in a fog. Others may be saying "I'm okay", or "Oh yeah, I'm trying not to worry about ... I was upset for a period of time, but I'll now put it behind me". Others may be angry with someone or about something.

All of us have a unique history. We are the combination of our genetic inheritance and interaction with our environment. There is no one exactly the same as you. Thus, each individual will experience events in a way that is different from everyone else. This difference in our experience is evident in all our emotions, including grief that accompanies a loss.

### How is grief experienced?

Feelings of grief usually follow a loss. There are many different ways to describe what individuals experience during this process. One way is by a three phase sequence. Although this sequence can be logically and neatly presented on paper, it is not so neat and ordered when one is actually experiencing it.

#### 1. The shock of finding out

The first phase may be described as the event. News is brought to you, or you directly experience what has happened. There may be shock at what has occurred. Thoughts such as "*I can't believe it ... there has been a mistake*" are commonly expressed. If the person has died in an untimely way, there may be thoughts about not having done enough to help them or "*What if....I had noticed, done, said....*" At extremes, your body, both physically and emotionally, diverts all its energy into coping with the immediate situation confronting you. You may experience alarm, disbelief, and denial of what has occurred. In the lesser forms of change there may be just a sense of difference, or a sense that the familiar no longer exists. Things are not as you would like, nor as they should be.

## 2. The grief phase

During this phase the full emotional impact of the loss or change is experienced. Thoughts such as "*it's happened, but it should not have happened ... it just doesn't make sense ... things will never be the same*" will recur. In addition to feelings such as anger, guilt and shame, there can be physical signs of these emotions (such as insomnia, heavy chest, upset stomach). You may be preoccupied with the loss. There may be a desire to share your experience of the loss and its significance with others. Your coping and "getting on" behaviour will be punctuated by what you or others may see as "non-coping behaviour".

Things associated with the loss such as a date, a song, a picture will act as reminders of the loss. Once reminded you may re-experience the importance of the loss. Many bereaved people may also begin to question the meaning of their lives in light of their loss at this time. The search for meaning can leave a bereaved person feeling isolated from others who do not seem to understand or be able to help. Sometimes when the person has departed in an untimely way, the people left behind can also feel concerned about their own emotional wellbeing and may have thoughts of harming themselves.

Finding the opportunities to talk to friends or family can be of great help during this difficult time. Sometimes people prefer to speak privately to someone outside their normal circle of friends and family. Talking to a counsellor or a chaplain, for example, can offer this opportunity.

### ***Effects on Physical Health***

Many persons who are grieving loss also experience effects on their health. These are usually a direct consequence of the loss. However, some pre-existing conditions may be worsened by the stress associated with this loss.

The health concerns commonly experienced are usually symptoms of stress. These include:

Appetite changes	Dizziness	Lack of coordination
Chest pains	Fatigue	Migraine
Chills	Headaches	Muscle aches, pains and twitches
Clenched fists	Heart palpitations	Nausea
Clenched jaw	High blood pressure	Sleep disturbance
Constipation	Increased sweating	Startled responses
Cramps	Increased urination	Tremors
Diarrhoea	Indigestion	Vomiting

## **Effects on Mental Health**

Without doubt, experiencing loss can affect mental health. You may experience changes to both thought processes and emotions. Furthermore, these (and other) reactions may be experienced with different degrees of intensity.

Some of the common changes to **thought processes** include:

Difficulty in making decisions	Impaired judgement	Nightmares
Difficulty in problem solving	Inability to unwind	Poor attention span
Difficulty in concentrating	Increased caution and doubt	Problems managing time
Disorientation	Loss of control	Procrastination
Flashbacks	Memory problems	Slowed thinking
Forgetfulness	Negative thoughts	The 'what if's?'

Some of the common changes to **emotions** include:

Anger	Emotional withdrawal	Lack of enthusiasm
Anxiety	Fear	Numbness
Blame	Frustration	Regret
Concern	Guilt	Sadness
Confusion	Hate	Shame
Decreased pleasure in life	Helplessness	Shock
Depression	Hopelessness	Tension
Distress	Irritability	Trauma
Embarrassment	Loss of confidence	Worry

In the face of loss particular emotions are commonly expected to be felt, such as anxiety, distress and depression. However, it is important to recognise that the loss can give rise to a wide array of emotions, both negative and positive. These experiences are quite typical.

For example, we may not expect to experience emotions like relief. Relief and a sense of freedom can also emerge when you lose someone close to you, particularly when relationships with the person were strained before the loss. After a long period of tension and instability in the relationship the absence of the person can provide a sense of relief and peace. And sometimes these feelings give rise to a sense of guilt for feeling this way.

**Measures which assist recovery** include:

- increase amount of physical exercise
- try not to numb or avoid the painful feelings with overuse of alcohol or drugs
- talk to someone about what you are experiencing
- structure your time so you are reasonably busy
- remind yourself that your reactions are normal and to be expected
- give yourself permission to feel sad, overwhelmed etc, express your feelings
- write down thoughts and feelings in a journal
- do things that feel good and are enjoyable
- don't make any major life-changing decisions
- eat well (regularly, nutritionally) and take lunch breaks
- make as many daily decisions as possible which give a feeling of having more control over your life
- continue your normal pattern of activities as much as possible
- friends may be under stress too, so it may be good to ask them how they are feeling
- take time out to do things that are pleasurable and/or nurturing

### **3. Moving on**

The final phase is that of acceptance. The loss is still important within your world, as it will always be, but you are not as severely affected by it as you were. Its significance remains but it is no longer debilitating. You are resuming your life and living. At this stage thoughts such as "*it was a terrible loss, it hurt me, and I still hurt ... I'm still affected by it ... but I can continue*" are more likely to occur. This can be a difficult phase; sometimes a sense of moving on in life can feel like a betrayal to the memory of the person.

#### **Where to find assistance**

During this painful process it is important to obtain support. This support can be gained from friends, relatives or those, such as a counsellor or chaplain, who are trained and willing to assist. While talking to others will not make the pain disappear, it can often make it more bearable to share your feelings with others. Pent-up feelings often do more harm than good. Discussion can act as a safety valve for these pent-up feelings.

Assistance in this area and many others can be obtained through an appointment with the University of Melbourne Counselling Service, which offers free and confidential counselling to staff and students of the University.

**University of Melbourne Counselling Service 03 8344 6927**

For telephone counselling assistance:

**Life Line 13 11 14**  
**Grief Line 9596 7799**

**University of Melbourne Chaplaincy Service 03 8344 6034**

Please also see our website:

[http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/counsel/Information\\_resources/grief.html](http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/counsel/Information_resources/grief.html)

Adapted from *Coping with Loss*, produced by the RMIT Counselling Service