



## Understanding Grief

By Sasha J. Mudlaff, M.A.

**What is grief?** Grief is a natural and normal reaction to loss and change. It is a response which is physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual.

**When does grief occur?** It occurs when something or someone which we have been dependent upon is no longer present. Thus, we respond with grief in such instances as the death of a loved one, divorce, separation, moving, losing a job, physical disability, etc. Grief for death is likely to be its most intense expression.

**For whom do people grieve?** We always grieve for *ourselves*; for the very real losses that we endure. Sometimes a loss stems from the death or absence of another person; sometimes a loss stems from our own impending death or disability.

**What happens when people grieve?** The grief reaction of any given individual is highly personal. There is no set list or order of what one should or should not feel, nor is there a certain time frame in which one "gets over it". Grieving people experience some or all of the emotions listed below. Each is to be understood as completely natural and ultimately helpful in working through the grieving process.

*"When we take time to think our thoughts and listen to our feelings,  
Parts of each day seem to get better --  
Even though there will be times when we'll need to cry all over again."  
From: "When Someone Dies", by Sharon Greenlee*

### Intervals of Grief

Understanding the common characteristics of grief can help the grieving person to more effectively cope with his or her reactions when faced with loss. So often a person is overwhelmed with the sense that they are "losing it" or going crazy. Being able to define the intervals of grief can help give someone the "permission" he or she needs to feel what they're feeling and think what they're thinking. There is no *normal*/time span. However, in very general terms, grief can be divided into three intervals: *Early Grief*, *Acute Grief*, and *Subsiding Grief*.

1. **Early Grief** is what occurs when one initially find out about the death.

- It can last from a few hours to a few days.
- In this interval, the reality of what has happened has not yet registered.
- A person may experience such things as shock, numbing, denial and anger.



2. **Acute Grief** is the most difficult of the intervals to work through.

- It can last from a few months to a *few years*.
- An overwhelming array of emotions surface during this very trying time. Although the reality of the loss is understood in one's mind, it is often accompanied by pangs of intense yearning for the loved one, spasms of distress, tearful or uncontrolled sobbing, restlessness, insomnia, preoccupation with thoughts of the loved one, or even a constant sense of the presence of the loved one. One may experience a decrease in the ability or desire to function day to day as before.
- At the depth of grief, one may experience depression. It takes significant effort and perseverance to get beyond this very painful point, and this is when support may be most needed.

3. **Subsiding Grief** is the ability to endure and recuperate from the painful Acute Grieving interval and accept the fact that one must 'get on with life'.

- Subsiding grief lasts indefinitely.
- Subsiding grief is not a smooth and gentle path; it is a continuous series of highs and lows, especially as one confronts such things as birthdays, anniversaries, family days and holidays.
- However, a person is able to begin to: create new life patterns in the absence of the loved one; find reasons to go on living by reinvesting his or her energy in new things and new relationships; find creative ways to retain the memory of the deceased (this is an especially important part of the healing process).
- **Those who avoid their grief may never reach this significant and necessary interval.** A person must be patient and give themselves plenty of time and permission to grieve.

An analogy of grief: The death of a loved one is like a physical wound on one's body where grief is the gradual healing of that wound. We will heal just like a physical wound heals -- from the inside out. Avoiding grief is avoiding healing.

*Grief is a strange mixture of joy and sorrow - joy to be alive and sorrow at the loss of your loved one. Your courage is not the absence of fear and pain, but the affirmation of life despite the fear and pain.*

*- Dr. Earl Grollman*

## Resources

Bolby, John, (1980). Attachment and Loss Volume III: Loss. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Jewett, Claudia, (1982). Helping Children Cope with Separation and Loss. Massachusetts: The Harvard Press.

Miller, Dr. Dale, (1985?). Helpful Answers About Grief. Chair, Department of Religion, Drake University, Des Moines, IA.

Mudlaff, Sasha (1991). Children Grieve, Too. Unpublished literature review. Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY.

