



HEALTHQUEST

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOCUSING ON
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND CONCERNS.

SAYING GOOD-BYE: DEALING WITH LOSS

One of the obvious but often overlooked facts about life is that, at some point, we can likely expect to experience a significant loss. These losses are many and varied. The death of a loved one, end of a marriage or other love relationship, loss of a job - all of these are major losses and stresses.

The Holmes-Rahe Scale of stress rating lists the death of a spouse at the top of the stress list with 100 points. Close behind is divorce with a rating of 73 points. Further down the list, being fired from work, and retirement, have ratings of 47 and 45 points respectively.

Even those of us who have never experienced a major loss in our lives have experienced some minor loss. Loss is the loneliness you felt when you left the security of home for that first day of school. And loss is the disappointment you feel when you reach forty and realize that you're never going to attain the lofty goals you set for yourself in your twenties.

WHAT IS GRIEF?

"Grief and mourning are a group of feelings associated with loss," says Eva Sansom, EAP counsellor at Warren Shepell Consultants. She points out that, although people may use different words to describe their feelings, the feelings are similar to everyone.

"These three variables affect the depth of loss," says Sansom:

- ▲ The person's style of coping with loss. How has she or he managed and dealt with past experiences of loss?
- ▲ All other stress that is present in a person's life at the time of the loss. Does the loss of a spouse intensify other stresses surrounding the issues of childcare and financial support?
- ▲ The quality of the relationship. The death of a grandparent whom a person seldom saw may not be felt as deeply as the death of a child.

EAP counsellor Sue Lennox describes the grieving process as being "similar to a roller coaster ride because it consists of ups and downs. One day a person may feel a bit better, then, boom they have a really bad day. It's important for people to realize that this is normal."

As a society, North Americans generally don't tolerate grief. Although we expect bereaved people to get on with their lives, Lennox points out that getting over a loss takes time. "The grieving

process shouldn't be rushed. It's necessary for bereaved persons to feel sad, shed tears, attend religious and memorial services, if they are so inclined," she says. In other words, bereaved people must do things that enable them to mourn.

THE PHASES OF GRIEF

The experts tell us that the mourning process is similar for all losses. The difference falls in the degree of how much or how little significance is the loss, and its impact on our life. The five phases of grief that most people experience when a loved one dies are similar for the ending of a relationship or the loss of a job.

"The first phase is surprise and disbelief," says Sansom. "You are in shock - it's like being hit over the head with a two-by-four." In the second phase, you start to feel the pain and you may find yourself saying things like, "What now?" or "Why me?" During the next two phases you will usually experience feelings of guilt and anger. Gradually, the fifth and final phase of grief comes when you have accepted the loss, and then are able to face life with hope.

"Long after the loss has occurred, individuals may suddenly react to the loss they felt they had accepted. For example, when a former spouse becomes involved with another person, remarries or has another child, they may find themselves experiencing any or all of the feelings associated with loss all over again," says Sansom. This can be very confusing and unsettling for the individual. It's important to understand the far-reaching effects of a loss to understand where these feelings come from.

Although the phases of grief are predictable, the feelings may not be in this exact sequence, and the duration of each can vary from person to person. It's important to realize that everyone in a family may not be experiencing the same feelings at the same time. In other words, grief is an individual process. A couple grieving the death of a child, for instance, may not be in the best position to help and support each other if one is in a state of disbelief, while the other is experiencing anger over the loss.

All of the feelings we experience during the grieving process have to do with accepting the reality of the loss and saying good-bye. It is the denying of these feelings or not letting go that leads to problems.

HOW CAN YOU HELP YOURSELF TO DEAL WITH LOSS?

Here are some options from EAP counsellors, Eva Sansom and Sue Lennox:

VENT YOUR FEELINGS

Make a contract with a good friend to get together once a week for a month. Ask your friend if he or she will listen while you talk about your loss. If you need to talk more than once a week, make arrangements with two friends - perhaps, one for Monday and the other for Thursday. Make sure that your friends realize that you're not seeking advice. Tell them that by being there and just listening is supporting you. Perhaps you will want to renew the contract after a month.

JOIN A GROUP

People usually find it helpful to be with others who are going through a similar loss. People who have lost a child might want to join an organization for Bereaved Families. Those who have lost a spouse will find a number of self-help groups available for widows and widowers.

LEARN SOMETHING ABOUT GRIEF

All of the different feelings that are experienced during a loss can be frightening. Oftentimes, feelings are less frightening when we realize that they are common and others also experience similar feelings. It may be helpful to read some books on the subject or discuss grief with a counsellor or your family doctor. This will help you to recognize when your feelings are normal or when you may need help to work through your feelings.

IDENTIFY WHAT COPING STRATEGIES HAVE WORKED BEFORE

If writing about your loss in a journal or talking about it with friends helped when you lost your job, the same thing may help when you are coping with the loss of a loved one.

THINK ABOUT HELPING OTHERS

Sometimes getting involved with a specific cause that may work towards the prevention of loss of someone else's life can help us redefine our loss. Families having lost a loved one in a motor vehicle accident involving a drunk driver have found comfort working with groups that attempt to reduce the incidence of such accidents for other families. When loss of a loved one is due to a particular illness, people have found comfort in volunteering for foundations such as the Heart or Cancer Society.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR PHYSICAL HEALTH

Coping with our feelings is always a little easier when we are in good physical health. Try to get adequate rest and eat a balanced diet.

HOW CAN YOU HELP A FRIEND OR RELATIVE WHO HAS SUFFERED A MAJOR LOSS?

- ▲ Listen! Listen! Listen! No matter how independent a person appears, he or she still needs the support of family and friends.
- ▲ Provide practical help. Something as simple as a home-cooked casserole or cookies is not only helpful, but it also lets people know that you care about them.
- ▲ Help a bereaved person to make plans for getting through special occasions such as the first Christmas without his or her spouse. The anniversary of a loss, either a death or divorce, is an especially sad time.

There's no question about it that loss is a necessary and painful part of life. But perhaps what matters most is that there are ways in which we can help ourselves and others say good-bye, and deal with loss.

You could try some of the ideas and suggestions outlined here, but it is perfectly understandable to seek out advice from a professional counsellor.

It is very difficult to think about what do when you are experiencing a loss, or want to help someone else who is. Often, even trying to make sense of loss is a daunting task for a person to do alone. Our counsellor can be there for you to help guide you through.

Our EAP counsellors are trained to deal with this emotionally painful matter. They know how complex an issue it is, and that each individual situation will need its own approach. An approach that will hopefully bring some comfort to you and others involved.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP counsellors to arrange a telephone or in-person counselling session.

All contact between you and your counsellor is completely confidential.

English Service: 1-800-387-4765
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