

GRIEF AND RECOVERY

by Rebecca Stanwyck, LCSW

Grief is a normal and natural response to loss. **Recovery** is feeling better—being able to enjoy fond memories without triggering painful feelings of sorrow, guilt, or remorse.

Grief may result from any loss, large or small: the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, divorce, disability, retirement, the death of a pet, and even a change in residence are all events that can cause feelings of grief.

PHASES OF GRIEF:

While everyone experiences, and expresses, grief differently, there seem to be three fairly typical phases in the grieving process: shock, acute grief, and recovery.

Phase One: **Shock** seems to be nature's way of protecting us from the full force of an event involving loss. There is **disbelief** because the full meaning of the loss has not yet sunk in (*"There's been a mistake; this is not happening; I'm having a bad dream."*) You may feel **numb** while carrying out the necessary tasks (e.g. going to the hospital, contacting relatives, making funeral arrangements, taking over work assignments). Others may mistakenly think you're OK (*"She's taking it so well!"*) This phase may last for hours, days, or even weeks.

Phase Two: **Acute grief** is the most difficult phase. As the disbelief and numbness wear off, you begin to experience the full extent of the painful feelings. **Anger** is often the first emotion to be felt—anger at God, for allowing this to happen; or at anyone who you feel may have contributed to, or failed to prevent, this loss. It's even normal to feel angry at the person who died! You may also experience feelings of **guilt** or **remorse** related to things you wish had been different (*"If only I'd told him how much I cared,"* or *"Maybe if I'd been here—or hadn't gone there—this never would have happened."*)

This phase may last for months or years, and can include these symptoms:

- Insomnia—or increased desire to sleep
- Loss of appetite—or compulsive overeating
- Increased use of drugs or alcohol
- Memory loss—can't remember where you're going
- Trouble with concentration
- Periods of confusion, and difficulty making even simple decisions
- Frequent and/or rapid mood swings
- Lack of energy or motivation
- Loss of desire for sex
- More frequent headaches, or other aches and pains
- Desire to isolate from friends and regular social activities
- Fears about your own health and safety, or fear of losses yet to come

Phase Three: **Recovery** may take years, and is a gradual process in which the pain softens and recedes, memories become nostalgic, and there is a renewed interest in the outside world. You will likely never forget your loss, but you may learn to make a place for your memories in your heart, and feel ready to go on with life again.

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SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS: “ACTING RECOVERED”

Our society does not prepare us very well to deal with loss. We are taught the importance of acquiring things and relationships, but not how to let go of them. For example, if your pet died when you were a child, your parents may have said, *“Don’t cry, we’ll get you a new pet.”*

In other words, we are taught to **bury our feelings** and **replace the loss** as soon as possible. That might work if we’re talking about getting a new pet, or even a new job; but what do you do when the loss is a parent, a child, a spouse, close relative or friend? Because we are so uncomfortable with the grieving process, there can sometimes be a great deal of pressure put upon the grieving person to **“get closure and move on”**.

What doesn’t help: Although they mean well, your friends, family members and co-workers may say or do things that keep you from working through your grief.

- They’re afraid of your feelings: they say *“Get hold of yourself”, “Be strong”, or “You can’t fall apart now”*.
- They try to change the subject.
- They intellectualize: they say things like *“He led a full life”, “All things must pass”, “Be thankful you can have another child” or “God never gives us more than we can handle”*.
- They think that “keeping busy” helps.
- They don’t want to talk about death.

Because we want the approval of those around us, and since we are tired of feeling bad, we may opt for an “Academy Award” recovery, and begin to **“act recovered”** even when we’re not. This kind of false recovery can lead to a loss of aliveness and spontaneity, as well as the suppression of all feelings, even the happy ones.

What does help: There are active steps you can take to help you through the grief:

Accept the reality of your loss. An initial reaction of denial is normal, and helps to cushion the impact of the loss, but you must learn to come to terms with it.

Experience the painful feelings. This is the toughest task. Your feelings may seem so overwhelming that you’re afraid to face them. It helps to talk to someone who can help you manage your emotional response, like a minister or a therapist.

Adjust and adapt to the loss. Though you can’t replace a person, at some point you must begin to adapt to the changes that the loss has created in your life. This may mean learning new skills, such as cooking or balancing a checkbook.

Re-invest emotional energy into the world. If you have worked through the first three tasks, sooner or later you will find that the pain has receded and you are ready to take on new challenges, open up to connecting with others, and look toward the future.

“I’m not OK, and you’re not OK—and that’s OK.” Elizabeth Kubler-Ross