



Cooinda

The Journey of Grief

Written by Margaret Aldous

Chief Executive/Director of Nursing

Edited April 2017

INTRODUCTION

PREPARATION FOR DEATH

Sometimes when a person's death is anticipated, it may be beneficial for both the person who is dying and their loved ones to talk their thoughts and feelings. It might be a conversation about their life and death. It can provide an opportunity to talk of past, present and future.

In particular, the things that have been, and are important for them. Things such as talking over memories, experiences and the things that mattered in their lives. A chance to express love, heal old wounds, and to make plans for the future for those people who remain. We also understand that, for some people and their families, just being together without talking is right for them.

In the time leading to a death, families and significant others are encouraged to spend as much time as they wish with their dying relative or friend. Coinda staff will be able to support you and answer any questions and concerns you may have at this time.

INITIAL FEELINGS

Whilst, we can feel that we are preparing for our loved ones death, when it happens, it may still come as a shock. Often people feel overwhelmed and experience physical, emotional and psychological changes. Your mind may be flooded, you may feel numb and simple tasks become difficult. It is quite normal and healthy to wish to talk over your feelings and the events surrounding the death. Acceptance of the death often begins this way.

If you would like to see your loved one following their death this is usually possible either at Coinda or at the funeral parlour. This often helps to acknowledge the death and that the person you loved has actually died.

ARRANGING A FUNERAL

For most people the funeral is a key part of the grieving process. It offers a chance for you to face the very difficult reality of death in a supported setting. It can be a celebration of the life of the loved one who has died and an opportunity to say goodbye to them. After a death, the family should notify the funeral director of their choice and advise them that the death has occurred.

The funeral director will support you to arrange the funeral, complete the necessary papers and register the death with the Government registrar.

THE IMPACT OF GRIEF

Grief is a healthy human response to loss, not only through death, but separation, divorce, miscarriage, disability, loss of job, of property, children leaving home etc. Grief is a very unique experience and it takes time to work through. It is a natural response to a significant loss.

It is common to experience some or all of these feelings or emotions:-

Numbness—a state of shock, unable to think clearly, or to believe what has happened

Denial—that the death has occurred – “No, it cannot be true.”

Fear or panic- at what lies ahead, of being left alone, having to go on, of a similar event happening.

Unreality—the feeling that you will wake up and everything will be “back to normal.”

Anger—directed at various sources

Guilt—“If only.....”

Helplessness—at humans’ inability to have control over many situations.

Crying—often spontaneous and uncontrollable ‘out of the blue’.

Sorting—the need to go over and over the events leading up to the death. If the death has been sudden, you may experience a need to try to piece together what has happened and how the death has occurred.

Thinking—Constant thoughts and reminiscences of your loved one with inability to concentrate

Depression—mood swings, sadness, feeling unable to go on with your life. The feeling of being physically and mentally drained, of emptiness.

Anger—often at the person who has died, that more was not done to help your loved one, lack of understanding by others.

Guilt—maybe for the bad times, or for things said or done that are now regretted.

Remorse—perhaps you would have done things differently had you known the person was going to die.

Unfinished business—frustration that things that had been planned together and not achieved, or things not expressed to the person before they died.

Sighting—a feeling that you have seen the person who has died, in a crowd, only to realise it was not them. Seeing or hearing the person about the house.

Disorganisation—tasks previously simple suddenly become difficult or impossible to do.

Loneliness—the lack of someone to confide in – to be your friend.

Anxiety and possessiveness—towards others in the family – fear they may be injured or killed.

Withdrawal—the feeling that you cannot or do not wish to talk or be with anyone else because the pain is too intense or they not understand how you feel.

It is important for you to find someone with whom you are able to express these feelings freely without embarrassment or fear of judgement. Stopping the feelings will stop the process of grief and slow down your path through grief.

BEGINNING TO REORGANISE

For most people the experience of grief changes them and their value of life. Life cannot go back to how it was prior to the death, usually with time, there is an acceptance of the new situation.

Grief is a healing process; necessary to organise your life in a meaningful way in the future.

Eventually you will find that you are beginning to see things logically and realistically again.

Often there will be periods when you feel you are recovering only to find that something reminds you of the person who has died and you are overwhelmed by sadness again.

You may feel guilt that you are beginning to have periods of feeling better and laughter.

All these experiences are normal and need understanding by friends and family.

HELPING YOURSELF

Accept help from friends – it is difficult to recover alone.

Allow yourself time to work through your grief, do not have expectations that you should “recover” within an allotted period.

Give yourself permission to cry, scream, grieve, it is important not to bottle up your emotions.

Many people find that the feelings of pain and sadness seem to get worse, instead of better. This will, with time, improve, if you express your pain.

Be cautious in the use of medications and alcohol. They can cloud your awareness to the extent of grief, without allowing you to deal with it constructively.

You may feel a shift in some of your friendships. Some people may find your new situation difficult to deal with, not knowing what to say, or how to react to you. Carefully select those people who seem to understand and care, who you can confide in and talk openly to, allow them to become a little closer to you.

Accept that others who cannot cope with your grief are still good friends. Give them space to be your friends even though they may have trouble accepting your grief.

As time passes attempt to start doing a few different things, things you did not do with the person who has died, e.g. going to the pictures, a sporting event, or an adult education course. Initially this may be difficult, but it is important to keep trying. Massage, relaxation and medication can be very beneficial, to relieve the stress and trauma to which your body has been subjected.

Attempt to maintain an adequate nourishing diet. Initially it may be difficult to eat, but gradually you should attempt to begin eating nourishing meals again. Illness is often more common in those who are grieving, so it is important to care for yourself and your body.

Keeping a diary appears to benefit many people as it gives them the opportunity to express their emotions and on rereading a chance to gauge progression through the healing process.

Try not to make important decisions in the first twelve to eighteen months. This of course is not always possible, but it adds extra stress to you and you may later regret the decision made.

Birthdays, anniversaries and traditional family times, e.g. Christmas, Easter, are often very difficult as your sense of loneliness and memories of past times come flooding back to you. It is normal to feel very sad at these times so do not try to hide your emotions.

WAYS TO HELP A GRIEVING PERSON

Be there – even though you might feel helpless, it is appropriate to feel helpless, and words you might say cannot make the bereaved feel better, so do not seek frantically for something meaningful to say – compassionate silence is a great comfort.

Physical contact, touching, holding etc. maybe beneficial, if you both feel comfortable with contact.

Be patient, allow the grieving person to talk. There will be the need to go over and over the same thing many times; be supportive, understanding but never judgmental.

Permit expressions of anger and guilt, encourage the person to continue to talk.

Efforts to comfort by using phrases like “there, there don’t cry” are not appropriate and should certainly be avoided, as it implies that the person should not express their grief in that manner.

VERY IMPORTANT – LISTEN, do not talk, it is very off putting to be wishing to express your emotions, but not able to get a word in edgeways!

If you feel you are unable to continue to support the person, or that they are not progressing over time, suggest that the person seek further help and if necessary go with them to get the support.

CHILDREN AND DEATH

Generally speaking, children younger than four, view life and death as temporary conditions and anticipate that the person will return. Children four to six have a better understanding and often death is associated with a personal loss – that the person is no longer available to do things or be with the child. It is appropriate to explain to the child that the person is not able to return to be with them. Answers need to be brief, simple and repeated as necessary.

From the age of about seven to ten children begin to comprehend the finality of death and progress through the thoughts of what happens following death.

From the age of about eleven children are beginning to think more abstractly and are searching for meanings and values.

Children of all ages should be told the truth about the person who has died and statements such as “Grandpa has gone on a long trip” are highly inappropriate. It is usually appropriate to simply say “Grandpa has died”.

As far as possible the death should be faced openly and honestly together by the family. Physical closeness and contact can be reassuring at this time.

With regard to children viewing the deceased person, attending the funeral and cemetery, this generally appears beneficial if it is what the child wishes. Children should never be coerced or made to feel guilty if they prefer not to be involved. If they are permitted and wish to participate in these things they should be prepared in advance for what they will hear and see and be in the care of a loving supportive adult.

SUPPORT FROM COOINDA

Cooinda has a Community Support person on staff who is able to provide initial support for people who are grieving and if required put you in touch with a person to provide ongoing support. If you wish to access this service, please speak with staff at reception.

References:

Coping with Grief, Mal McKissock

Pamphlets from Tobin Brothers, Funeral Directors

A Time to Live, A Time to Die, Theresa Plane