

## MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT GRIEF

When we are misinformed about grieving we may have unrealistic expectations about our own grief. When we do not meet those expectations we may feel guilt and failure because we are not *grieving correctly*. Misconceptions also affect how others think we *should* grieve. They may fail to understand what we are experiencing or think our grief is inappropriate. This can result in others not being available to us or thinking that there is something wrong with us.

### Myths About Grief

- All losses are the same.
- It takes two months to get over your grief.
- All bereaved people grieve in the same way.
- Grief always declines over time in a steadily decreasing fashion.
- When grief is resolved, it never comes up again.
- Family members will always help grievers.
- Children grieve like adults.
- Feeling sorry for yourself is not allowable.
- It is better to put painful things out of your mind.
- You should not think about your deceased loved one at the holidays because it will make you too sad.
- Bereaved individuals only need to express their feelings and they will resolve their grief.
- Expressing feelings that are intense is the same as losing control.
- There is no reason to be angry at people who tried to do their best for your deceased loved one.
- There is no reason to be angry at your deceased loved one.
- Only sick individuals have physical problems in grief.
- Because you feel crazy, you are going crazy.
- You should feel only sadness that your loved one has died.
- Infant death shouldn't be too difficult to resolve because you didn't know the child that well.
- Children need to be protected from grief and death.
- Rituals and funerals are unimportant in helping us deal with life and death in contemporary America.
- Being upset and grieving means that you do not believe in God or trust your religion.
- You and your family will be the same after the death as before your loved one died.
- You will have no relationship with your loved one after the death. The intensity and length of your grief are testimony to your love for the deceased.
- There is something wrong if you do not always feel close to your other family members, since you should be happy that they are still alive.
- There is something wrong with you if you think that part of you has died with your loved one.
- If someone has lost a spouse, he or she knows what it is like to lose a child.
- When in doubt about what to say to a bereaved person, offer a cliché.
- It is better to tell bereaved people to "Be brave" and "Keep a stiff upper lip" because then they will not have to experience as much pain.
- When you grieve the death of a loved one, you only grieve for the loss of that person and nothing else.
- Grief will affect you psychologically, but in no other way.

## COMMON THEMES OF GRIEF

### 1. Initial Impact and Awareness of the Loss

This initial impact occurs when the person first recognizes that the loss has occurred. It is characterized by acute feelings of emotional and physical distress ... reported as a stabbing wound or blow to the stomach or chest, a weakening of the knees and a difficulty in swallowing and speech. Initial impact may also occur later when awareness of a new dimension of the loss is brought into consciousness: even across the life span as new periods of development surface new awarenesses of the consequences of the loss.

### 2. Safeguarding

Safeguarding themes are self-protecting and self-preserving aspects of grief. They are characterized by strategies to limit awareness of the loss.

Through safeguarding, the full impact of the loss can be buffered until the person can gain enough safety and strength to face the painful awareness of separation. Because of this, periods of safeguarding can be seen as useful and helpful coping strategies.

Shock is one aspect of safeguarding. It usually occurs immediately following initial awareness. It is nature's way of softening reality as the body's safety valve.

Other examples of safeguarding are anger, avoidance, searching, bargaining and sacralizing.

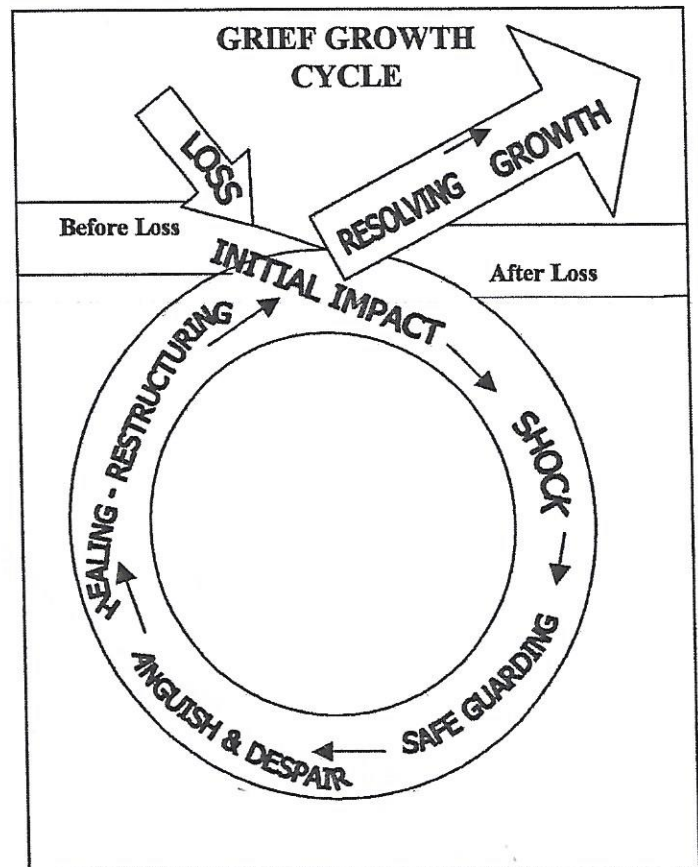
People who become stuck in these holding-on, letting-go patterns often develop lifestyles that limit or compromise emotional, physical or spiritual well-being.

### 3. Awareness of the Loss = Anguish and Despair

Like initial awareness, these periods of anguish, awareness and despair are times when the full impact of the loss is experienced.

These periods are usually very intense times of longing and sorrow and are characterized by a loss of hope, despair, and existential or spiritual loneliness. With time these periods are softened in intensity, frequency and duration.

Through the awareness periods of grief, the bonds and attachments to the past are realized so that healing, perspective and restructuring can occur.





## COMMON GRIEF RESPONSES

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Physical</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fatigue</li> <li>• Lack of energy</li> <li>• Sympathy pains</li> <li>• Hollowness in stomach</li> <li>• Gut sensations</li> <li>• Tightness in chest</li> <li>• Tightness in throat</li> <li>• Heaviness in chest</li> <li>• Short of breath</li> <li>• Dry mouth</li> <li>• Increased sensitivity to noise</li> <li>• Pain</li> <li>• Sleep Disturbance</li> <li>• Restlessness</li> <li>• Tension</li> <li>• Exhaustion</li> <li>• Loss of appetite</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Emotional</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sadness</li> <li>• Loneliness</li> <li>• Anger</li> <li>• Guilt</li> <li>• Anxiety</li> <li>• Shock</li> <li>• Yearning/Longing</li> <li>• Relief</li> <li>• Numbness</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• "Grief Attacks"</li> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Helplessness</li> <li>• Out of Control</li> <li>• Insecurity</li> <li>• Resentment</li> <li>• "Just don't care"</li> <li>• Diminished self-concern</li> <li>• Sorrow for one who died</li> <li>• Betrayal/Disloyal</li> <li>• Emptiness</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Mental</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disbelief</li> <li>• Distracted</li> <li>• Absent-minded</li> <li>• Forgetful</li> <li>• Low motivation</li> <li>• Dreams of deceased</li> <li>• Poor concentration</li> <li>• Preoccupation with deceased</li> <li>• Images of deceased</li> <li>• Expecting to see the deceased</li> <li>• Confusion</li> <li>• Memories of other losses</li> <li>• Lack of focus</li> <li>• Denial</li> <li>• Disorientation</li> <li>• Preoccupation with life of the deceased</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Social</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social withdrawal</li> <li>• Diminished desire to make conversation</li> <li>• Being single</li> <li>• Feeling need to "take care of others"</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Behaviors</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Searching</li> <li>• Crying/Tears</li> <li>• Carrying special objects</li> <li>• Going to grave site</li> <li>• Keeping an altar</li> <li>• Keeping belongings</li> <li>• Looking at photos</li> <li>• Listening to tapes</li> <li>• Talking to the deceased</li> <li>• Avoidance of grief arousal</li> <li>• Changes in daily routine</li> <li>• Inability to finish things you've started</li> <li>• Tendency to assume mannerisms or traits of deceased</li> <li>• Need to tell and retell things about deceased</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Spiritual</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questions about God</li> <li>• Why would God allow this to happen?</li> <li>• How are they?</li> <li>• Where are they now?</li> <li>• When will I die?</li> <li>• Will I see them again when I die?</li> <li>• What will happen to me when I die?</li> <li>• Sensing the presence of the deceased</li> </ul>

#### **4. Restoration = Healing and Restructuring**

Restoration themes of grief occur as the person moves toward his/her previous level of functioning. They are characterized by a return of energy and an ability to begin imagining and accommodating to a future in the absence of what was lost.

Restoration aspects of grief represent periods when perspective and balance is being regained. There is a reorganizing or restructuring of roles and activities so that life can be resumed. New skills, attitudes and knowledge may have to be gained during this period.

This period of grief/growth has been referred to as a time of "peace" or "acceptance". For the most part, people who complete the restoration phases of grief are no longer struggling.

#### **5. Growth = Resolution, Integration and Transformation**

This period of grief has long been recognized in the spiritual literature and in the expressive arts, but has only recently been included in the theories of growth and transpersonal psychology and bereavement.

Aspects of growth and transformation occur as people are able to extract the essential meaning that was invested in the loss so that it can be rehabilitated and integrated into the future. In this manner there is a sense of gain or expansion derived from the loss rather than a sense of depletion.

People who grow through grief and those who are able to resolve and release that which kept them bound to the past often feel stronger and more capable than before the loss occurred. There is an increased ability to remember and cherish that which was lost and to embrace it as an important part of life.

New possibilities and relationships may be sought coupled with a new awareness of possibilities and an openness and trust in life. The growth from grief occurs for some as a period of transformation – new personal freedoms, deeper commitments to self and others, and an enhanced felt sense of belongedness, interrelatedness and connectedness to all.

Growth from grief follows acts of resolution that symbolize a letting go of, or completion of, the "work of grief". If grief is not brought to this fullness there will be a hazing of joy in living. This is because a portion of the person's energy remains tied to a past they cannot recover. Therefore the person continues to live with his or her grief firm in the belief that the pain of grief is like a scar that never heals.