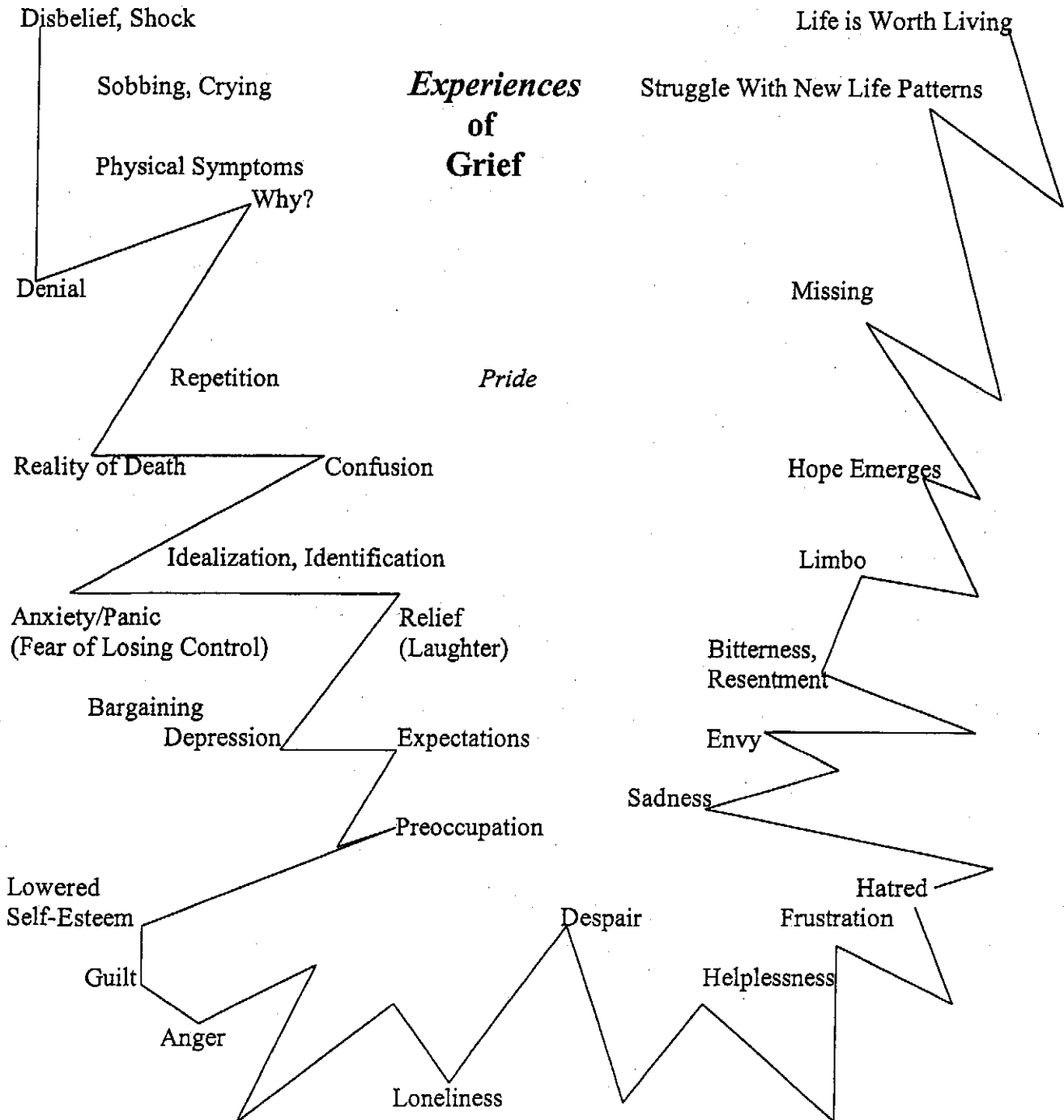


Specific Grief Reactions

Many books have now been written about the stages or common experiences of grief. While these books are very helpful, keep in mind that everyone does not necessarily go through every experience. Nor do they go through them in any set order. Several physical and emotional states may be experienced and in various ways --- *all at once, briefly, deeply, daily, not at all, in a relapsing fashion, and...slowly, but surely, toward recovery.*

Understanding the naturalness of these reactions helps us cope, and knowing that others have gone through similar pain helps us hope.



Again, stressing that *you* have your own timetable and your own style of grief and truly know best how to help yourself, common grief reactions are summarized here, along with suggestions to try to make each phase a bit easier.

Grief Reactions

What to Do

Shock

Feeling temporarily stunned; in a trance; tending to let others make decisions. *Characterized by:* disorientation and confusion. Can last for minutes, hours, even days.

Will resolve naturally as reality sets in.

Denial

An emotional place where strength can be gathered to face what lies ahead. *Characterized by:* disbelief in what has happened - sometimes even refusal to discuss it; avoidance of thinking about the loss and minimizing its impact. *Caution:* it may be tempting to get stuck here because *change* would force an admission of the significance of the loss.

Talk over fears and concerns with a trusted friend or counselor; confront and deal with issues which must be faced. Think positively about yourself and your ability to cope. Read books or listen to tapes that focus on coping skills. New ideas ease tension and fear even if you do not feel they relate directly to your situation.

Strong Emotions

FEAR – can range from minor annoyance to full blown panic. *Characterized by:* dread of the future; negative interpretations of everything that happens and lack of awareness of positive; fear of facing reality; speculation on “what ifs”; preoccupation with bodily sensations, even death.

Focus on positive things. View the slightest progress as moving in the right direction. Record improvements. Tell yourself affirming things. Talk to a good listener. Investigate—don't worry about things that will never happen. Find humor or create it. Laugh! Read. Meditate

HELPLESSNESS—Feelings of being pushed along where you do not wish to go; being out of control. *Characterized by:* mood swings including panic, depression and defeat; loss of belief in your personal power. *Caution:* family and friends may take over too many tasks for too long.

Make a list of things you are able to do; allow others to help; be aware that this is a state of mind avoid people who “smother”; seek out sources of courage and strength; use humor; give yourself credit.

Grief Reactions

ANGER—desire to blame someone; downward spiral which uses a lot of energy; internal "simmering"; irritability; bitterness. *Characterized by:* reliving of long-past situations that generated anger; verbally attacking people over insignificant issues; blocking out positive feelings; actively fighting opportunities for joy. *Caution:* suppressing anger can make you feel like you're going crazy.

APATHY—Faded interest in life which may result when fearing something that seems totally negative and overwhelming. *Characterized by:* disconnecting from your situation and normal activities; telling yourself; "you no longer care, there's no use, there's nothing you can do about your situation"; snapping at others who try to help. *Caution:* this may seem like an easier way out than sorting through and expressing complex feelings and thoughts.

Evolve from unmet expectations and anticipations. *Characterized by:* looking to the future instead of focusing on present; pretending that everything is all right while feeling just the opposite; fearing being hurt again. *Caution;* a belief that only your loved one's return can fix things, and setting unrealistic goals perpetuates a vicious cycle.

What to Do

Talk with someone who can be trusted to keep conversations confidential. A professional counsellor or a support group can serve this purpose. Ask if being angry is helping. If not, replace it with a more positive feeling, like love - this is difficult, but important! Listen to music and audiotapes that bring peacefulness and relaxation. Use anger as energy to spur activity. Research. Volunteer. Learn a new hobby. Exercise. Construct. Dance. Paint. Do anything that will rechannel thoughts into something constructive.

Open yourself to feelings which have been buried; build a supportive environment; think about those who care about you—closing them out hurts you both; reward yourself for small steps to rid yourself of this; crying is better than avoidance; be aware of what you gain from this state (for example, not having to make tough decisions) and seek more positive ways to deal with these issues. Become involved

Choose goals carefully—neither selling yourself short nor setting impossible ones; talk to a trusted listener who can lend a realistic, semi-detached view; give yourself credit for all accomplishments; practice relaxation and meditation. Focus on letting go of these feelings and on building new expectations.

Disappointment, Frustration

Guilt

Grief Reactions

Regret for "doing" or "not doing" something while the loved one was still alive; *can* be part of a healthy drive to understand and gain some control over situation. Can even be experienced as being a burden to others. *Characterized by*: doing things that risk injury; avoiding telling people of needs—thereby depriving them of chances to help; inventing reasons to avoid people so they won't be saddened also; thinking about the difficulty your situation is "causing" others; refusing to accept that others care; scanning events of the past, dwelling on mistakes. *Caution*: extreme forms may affect health, lower self-esteem, and inflict overly harsh mental punishment.

What To Do

Remind yourself of all the things you did to help your loved one; focus on positive accomplishments in the regrettable situation of the loss; reach out to others now; let people know what you need without being demanding; talk over these feelings with people to gain their perspective on the situation; let others help round out a positive picture of yourself (friends, family, counselors, clergy); meditate on more positive and helpful thoughts. Begin anew.

Depression

Powerful down currents which can color other feelings; an emotional paralysis more pervasive than sadness.

Characterized by: lack of motivation to do even simple tasks; frequent crying spells over an *extended* period of time; feeling abandoned; thinking "what's the use?"; dwelling on the past since the future looks bleak or worsening. *Caution*: quality of life is diminished by neglecting personal hygiene needs; blocking out positive feelings and supportive people robs you of remedies.

Focus on what you still have and what you have gained; keep active and involved with interesting, stimulating people; go to movies; read; listen to audiotapes that encourage positive images. Find words that contribute to your sense of peace and well being; ask how others cope with depression; explore emotions; reward yourself for positive thoughts and new activities. Allow yourself to "give in" occasionally; lovingly and persistently draw yourself out. Seek professional help if you are worried that your depression is lasting too long or affecting your daily life too severely.

Despair

Grief Reactions

Can develop gradually out of depression. *Characterized by:* giving up on oneself and on life; having little or no interest in events; persistently feeling empty and powerless; avoiding contact with others, even family members; waiting for the worst that can happen; experiencing a sense of betrayal—even by God. Hopelessness.

What To Do

An important step in breaking out of despair is to talk to some one you trust; a professional is recommended if despair predominates. Write down names of people whose lives you have touched. Accept love offered to you and return it whenever possible; express caring to others with a smile, touch or gesture; keep a journal and record at least one positive item each day; focus on progress you have made and help you have received.

Usually, negative feelings don't progress to the point of despair—although we all have our moments...

Cauldron.
I am a cauldron
Of confusion;
Too many events
Tug at my taut and inelastic mind,
I lose my place
Needing solitude
To thread this out.
And the new demands
Fracture the color paths
Before they can be followed
Far enough,
Smooth enough.

Margaret Sangree

Loneliness, Emptiness

Grief Reactions

Probably the most common, all-pervasive feeling for grieving people, *Characterized by:* deep yearning for the lost, loved one and a sense that part of your own being is missing.

What To Do

Time helps heal this wound as new ways of living and new relationships are explored.

*There are times when I am almost overwhelmed by loneliness.
Even with the people who care about me, I sometimes feel alone and isolated.*

*At these moments I need to understand that what I am experiencing might
not be loneliness, but aloneness—the awareness that even the people who
love me most cannot enter my experience totally.*

*At those moments of awareness I am open to the more subtle recognition of
a force or Power or entity that joins me in my aloneness, a force that seems
to be saying, "Allow you're a/loneness to change, to at/loneness."*

*Judith Garrison
Co-author: Cancer & Hope*

All of the above grief reactions are NORMAL for a person reacting to a loved one's death. It is *also* normal to *not* experience many, or most, of these reactions, as long as you are acknowledging reality and the energy in your own body. Feelings are very taboo in many families and in many parts of our culture—too many of us have been trained to disallow their expression and their legitimacy.