

## Grief

At some time in most people's life you will need to deal with grief. This is particularly true for Defence personnel and families, due to the sometimes dangerous and difficult environment in which we work. Grief is a simple word to describe a complex and often bewildering reaction we experience following a significant loss.

Death is not the only loss that causes us to grieve. Other events such as divorce, miscarriage, loss of a relationship, job, possessions, or home can also cause grief. The grief process involves a range of emotional, physical and/or behavioural reactions that can leave you feeling helpless, overwhelmed with sadness, confused and/or angry. There is no right or wrong way to cope with grief and the information provided here is designed to help you recognise many of the common responses to loss. This information can help you to cope better with your feelings, as intense and unfamiliar as they may be.

### Why do I feel so bad?

Grief is a complex process. Initially you may feel numb, disbelief, and shock. During this period a person may continue doing things for a person whom has left or died.

This state helps to protect you from the intense hurt of the loss. You are surprised that the world around you continues unchanged, when you feel that your world has been shattered. As days, weeks and months pass some of these initial reactions will pass as other stages of grief follow. You may notice some of the following reactions:



### Physical

Physically your body may ache with tension. You may experience stomach pains, headache, changes in appetite, low energy and motivation, poor sleep. Other reactions may include:

- Crying
- Breathlessness
- Nausea
- Agitation and restlessness
- Particularly susceptible to viruses, rashes or other minor illness

### Emotional / Psychological

Some people experience things they feel may be bizarre such as seeing their loved one's face in a crowd, crying when they smell their favourite scent, and certain keepsakes and reminders of the loved one may be treasured.

It is very common for people after a sudden loss to imagine all the "what if's". People may even feel guilty or blame themselves for the loss. It is not uncommon for people to try and make deals with God to return the person who is gone.

People may feel their lives have lost a purpose and some bereaved people describe wanting to die themselves.

Other common emotional and psychological reactions experienced in grief include:

- Poor concentration
- Fear
- Panic
- Depression

- Guilt
- Anger
- Sadness
- Withdraw from friends and family

### How to best cope during the grieving process

- Ask for help and support from family members or support group.
- Tell people what helps and what doesn't.
- Talk with others who experienced loss and grief.
- Recognise your feelings, be forgiving and patient with yourself.
- Be good to yourself.
- Use writing, art and music to let out your feelings.
- Give yourself time. There is no set time-frame for the grief process.
- Seek professional help if you feel you need it.
- Expect that while every day will get better, along the way there will be good and bad days.
- Maintain a healthy diet. Your immune system can be significantly affected when you are grieving and often you may not feel like eating. A healthy diet will help you fight against infection.
- Remember, it's not what life does to you that is important, it is what you do with what life does to you (McKissock, 1995, p.59).

### Things to avoid during the grieving process

- Be cautious. Grief cannot be side-stepped or cured by medication, alcohol or drugs. However, it may be appropriate to talk to your treating medical practitioner if you feel your symptoms are prolonged or unbearably intense.
- Trying to distract yourself by keeping extraordinarily busy, making significant changes in your life such as moving house or changing job may not be the most useful approach to coping with your grief. Instead, talk about your loss and remember your loved one in ways that are meaningful to you.

### Moving On

Although it doesn't seem possible now, there will come a time when the acute pain begins to recede and you will have learnt to live with the loss. There will be some degree of acceptance and resolution about the loss and you will no longer focus on grieving.

You will find that you have established new goals for yourself and a new pattern of life. You will begin to enjoy activities more and be able to look back and experience a sense of enjoyment about the things that were once in your life. Looking back will no longer cause pain and the feelings of grief previously experienced.

### Quick Tips

- Grieving is a complex process that can involve physical and psychological / emotional reactions.
- There is no set time frame for the grieving process; grief is different for each person.
- It is important to avoid making any major life decisions while you are grieving.
- Ensure you get the support and assistance you need through friends and/or professional support agencies.

- As much as you are unlikely to feel like it, maintain a healthy diet and keep in touch with people you find are helpful to you. It is important to look after yourself during this difficult time.
- Remember, grief is a process of adjustment that passes with time.

## 10 Things To Help People Who Are Grieving

The grieving process is complex and often intense. Giving support to someone who is grieving does not mean you need to be able to "cure" him or her. Often just being available, to listen, offering a hug or squeeze of the hand can make all the difference to a bereaved person. A good time to visit the bereaved is "after the flowers have died", about a week or so. Listed below are some strategies that you can do to help your friend during their time of grief.

1. Listen: let them tell their story over and over
2. Allow: them to express their feelings without criticism or judgement
3. Provide: time for them to grieve
4. Understand: that each person grieves differently
5. Encourage: them to express their memories of the deceased person
6. Help: with daily tasks because these chores become less of a priority for grieving persons
7. Talk: about your own sadness for their loss and mention the deceased person's name without fearing that it will upset the bereaved person
8. Realise: that sometimes it is important just to listen; you don't need to have the answers to questions such as "why?"
9. Reassure: be aware of the common reactions to grief and reassure the bereaved person that their response is normal and is part of the healing process
10. Remember: that grief may resurface at other significant times, such as birthdays, anniversaries, and Christmas.

## Helping a Grieving Person At Work

For weeks and sometimes months after a loss, it is normal for a bereaved person to exhibit some changes in their behaviour, attitude and even health. Sometimes the impact of their grief is so intense that it takes all their energy just to get through each day. Interest in family, work, and daily activities can lapse. When approaching a grieving work colleague or subordinate, it is important to keep the following points in mind:

- Be aware of common grief reactions. Many of these have been identified in the information listed above. Reactions can include physical as well as emotional or psychological changes. Irritability, mood changes, frustration and angry outbursts are not uncommon. Physical illness, tiredness, eating disorders, and general feeling of apathy can be experienced.
- Sometimes people fear being criticised by their work colleagues for their grief reaction. It is important to encourage the bereaved person to talk about their feelings and to encourage acceptance of grief reactions by other people.
- When a bereaved person returns to work, do not ignore them because of your own feelings of inadequacy or out of a fear of saying the 'wrong' thing. Some gentle words of condolence can offer the bereaved person a great deal by way of implied support for their situation.
- It may be necessary to give the bereaved person some extra consideration if there are significant work related demands at the time they return. Things such as shift changes, overtime, and additional responsibilities may need to be approached cautiously while the bereaved person is adjusting to the grief process. This is particularly the case if a spouse has died, resulting in increased domestic burdens on the surviving spouse.

- Some people attempt to cope with their intense grief by throwing themselves into work. It is important to recognise that while being busy may help time pass for them, it is not a useful long term strategy for coming to terms with their loss.
- Self-esteem can be shaken during the grief process as people face a range of reactions they may not have experienced previously. Reasonable expectations, some flexibility where possible, and personal encouragement can do a lot to assist people during this time.

## Helping Children With Grief

Children understand different things about loss and death as they get older. It is natural for adults to want to protect children from the concept of death, but even from an early age children quickly become aware of death through seeing dead insects and have some concept of the word "dead". Unless they are very young, it is often helpful for children to remain with the family during the grieving process. It will enable the child to gain support from familiar people around them, as much as they are also able to be sources of comfort and support.

The following are some guidelines to help you in discussing the issue of death with children:

- When telling a child about death, avoid using words such as "gone", "lost", "passed over" or "gone to sleep" which might confuse them. A brief explanation is most useful, but the child may need to have it repeated several times before they fully understand the meaning. Simple concepts such as the dead person cannot feel anything anymore and they cannot come back to life, will be important to help the child adjust to the notion that a life has stopped.
- Whatever the religious or spiritual outlook of the family is it should be shared with the child.
- Don't overload the child with details, but don't evade their questions either. Answer as honestly and simply as you are able.
- Although the sight of a familiar adult expressing their grief may be distressing to a child, it is important not to hide your feelings from children. Explaining that mum/dad is sad/lonely/crying because grandpa has died tells your child that he or she is allowed to have those feelings too and that feeling like this is normal under the circumstances.
- Do allow children to take part in farewells such as funerals if they wish to, although a child should never be forced or made to feel guilty if they choose not to participate in these rituals.
- Take seriously any fears or anxieties they might express. Take time to discuss their concerns and to provide factual and clear information that will reassure them.
- Children may express grief in different ways to adults. Don't expect their reactions to mirror your own. They may play grief-related games, such as going to a funeral or playing dead in an attempt to become familiar with the concept of death in their world. This is a normal part of grieving for children and should not be discouraged.
- Do not isolate the children from their friends. They need time, like adults, to gain from the support and affection offered by their close friends.
- Sometimes children do not appear to be grieving at all. They may behave as if nothing has changed. This is simply their way of managing their anxiety by assuring themselves that life goes on. It does not imply that they did not love the person who died or that they are not grieving for them.
- A child may express their grief by behaving in ways that are unusual for them such as angry outbursts, bedwetting, being disruptive at school and so forth. It is important to recognise these as reactions to grief and to respond with reassurance rather than punishment. Lots of cuddles, hugs and communication will help the child during the adjustment process.

## Quick Tip

- Children who are grieving need a lot of love, understanding and patience to be able to express their feelings in their own way and in a safe environment. Lots of cuddles, hugs, gentle smiles and clear communication will help them during the grief process.

## Where to get help

- Local Medical Centres
- Psychology Support Sections
- Chaplains
- Defence Community Organisation

## Support Lines

- All Hours Support Line (ASL) is confidential telephone support service for member and families in crisis 1800 628 036, outside Australia 61 2 9425 3878 -
- Lifeline 131114
- Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service (VVCS) This service is available to veterans of all deployments and their families. VETLINE – 24 hour emergency line (Sydney/Canberra) <1800 011 046>