

# Understanding Grief

A Public Education Brochure from



## CREMATION AND FUNERAL ALTERNATIVES

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To lose someone you love is to lose part of yourself. As you mourn, you may suffer intense pain--physical, emotional, and spiritual. *Grieving is the work you do to cope with the loss.* As hard and exhausting as this work is, it's natural and necessary. Letting yourself face and feel the loss is the first step to healing and feeling whole again.

To help light the way, we at Cremation and Funeral Alternatives, or CAFA, offer this brochure to answer some questions you may have about the grief experience. The hard work of grief is discussed frankly; it cannot be candy-coated.

For more specific help tailored to your situation, CAFA offers a variety of other brochures and books, videotapes, and personal assistance. Call 410-321-1005 for more information.

### **Will my grief be like others'?**

Famed bereavement expert Elizabeth Kubler-Ross spelled out the classic "stages of grief": shock, denial, anger, depression, and finally acceptance. In reality, no one's path through grief is predictable. Your relationship with the person, and the circumstances of his or her death, help shape your unique experience with grief.

Your reaction to the loss may vary from open despair to calm composure. For survivors who have endured the pain of seeing a loved one go through a long illness, the death may bring a sense of relief. If you have experienced a number of important losses over a lifetime, you may have developed excellent skills for coping. On the other hand, younger people who have experienced multiple losses may suffer

from "survivor's guilt," and even feel like joining their loved one in death. In any case, the loss will affect you. Grief is too powerful to be ignored.

## How does grief feel?

At first, you may feel numb. This is shock, a natural anesthesia to block out the full impact of the loss until you are better able to deal with it. As this fog lifts over the first weeks or months, you are likely to encounter not only deep sadness, but also a wide array of conflicting emotions and behaviors. These may well be upsetting, frightening, or confusing.

You may have powerful feelings of separation and longing for the absent person. You may dream or imagine that he or she is still alive. You may not be able to stop thinking about the person or the death. To feel connected, you may find yourself setting an extra place at the table or even taking the deceased's clothing with you to bed. Remember: *You're not crazy; you're grieving*. At other times you may want to avoid reminders of the lost person rather than dwelling on him or her.

You may experience guilt and "if-only" thoughts. Blaming yourself could be an attempt to make sense of something that seems senseless. You may envy those who haven't lost someone. You may be angry--at the deceased, at the doctors, at those around you, or at God. As you ask yourself "Why did this happen?" it is normal to question your faith.

Beset by all these confusing and draining emotions, you may become irritable and anxious. You may have trouble concentrating, remembering things, or keeping organized. Physically, grief can affect you in many ways, from aches to breathlessness. Your sleeping and eating habits may change too.

## How long does grief last?

Like everything else about grief, its duration varies with the individual. The more distressed a person is at the beginning, the longer the distress is likely to last. In all cases, it is a process, more often measured in years than in months.

Immediately after the death it is common to tell oneself, "This will be over soon." When the pain is still there, or even worse, several months later, you may think, "This will never end!" This can feed a general feeling of pessimism. Like death itself, grief is frustrating because we can't prevent or control it. But with patience and effort, it can be gotten through.

Grief experts suggest that you try to change your time focus. Take one day at a time, and try doing a little more each day. Also concentrate on any small pleasures you have during the day.

## What can I do to ease my grief?

The grief experience cannot be made easy, but it can be made better. Here are some of the gifts you can give yourself:

*Learn* about your loss and grief. Information can give you some sense of control and put your feelings in perspective. As you adjust your perceptions, you may feel better about things.

Give yourself *permission to grieve*. Crying can be cleansing and comforting. It is a sign of strength, not weakness, for a mourner to express his or her feelings openly. Validate and accept your feelings, pleasant or not. Keeping a daily journal has been a wonderful road map to recovery for many grieving people.

Take good care of *yourself*. Learn what you need at this time in your life. Maintain healthy habits: Good nutrition, proper rest, and exercise all can help you feel better. Beware of alcohol--a depressant that may make you feel worse.

A death is enough to deal with. Avoid other major changes, decisions, or disruptions in your life. Reestablish your routine at work and home. This will be hard at first, and you should expect lapses. But

you'll also have "normal" moments when you are able to concentrate on your tasks. These will help rebuild your confidence.

Gradually, in small ways, rearrange your daily habits and environment. By redecorating a room or taking up a hobby, you can begin to build your new identity. People are never "the same" after recovering from loss, and often find new purposes in life.

Choose hope over despair. Believe in yourself, and you will give yourself strength. Slowly you may find your outlook improving because you *choose* to make it better.

## **Where can I turn for help?**

The work of grieving does not have to be done alone. Give yourself permission to accept help from others. The more support you receive, the better off you'll be. If your friends mistakenly feel you want to be alone, don't hesitate to reach out to them.

You also can look to others who are grieving. Support groups and other programs to bring together the bereaved demonstrate that "grief shared is grief diminished." Besides providing a safe place to grieve, groups also help you make sense of your own experience by seeing how it is similar and different from others'. CAFA can provide you with more information to help you find a group that is right for you.

## **What counseling is available?**

Counseling of the bereaved may take a number of forms: *Informational* counseling can help answer your questions in a confusing time, about the events surrounding a death and the unfamiliar responsibilities they bring. *Spiritual* counseling can help you find solace in your faith or search for spiritual meaning. *Therapeutic* counseling is designed for those having severe grief reactions, such as sleep disturbance or alcohol or drug dependence. Through its own staff and referrals to a network of other professionals, CAFA can help you find the counseling you need--before, at the time of, or long after a death.

**Cremation and Funeral Alternatives, or CAFA, is the Baltimore area's comprehensive alternative to the traditional funeral home. It offers low-cost cremations and burials, personalized memorial ceremonies, and personal, professional assistance throughout the grief process.**

**At CAFA we believe in your right to information, options, and assistance in your time of need. In that spirit, this and other brochures are available free through CAFA. Please call 321-1005 for more information.**

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