

An Emotion That Sneaks Up on Many: Grief

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Grief is our natural response to loss, which can be loss of a loved one, loss of a relationship, such as after a breakup or divorce, or the loss of a sense of stability or comfort given changes in your life.

With effects that can be both physiological and psychological, our coping mechanisms are inherently different for everyone, dramatically varying at different stages of life. Unfortunately, it often takes a tragedy to realize just how vulnerable we really are, making it extremely difficult to navigate our way through the emotions that come along with our response. Interestingly, mourning, the way we externally process loss, often includes rituals such as funerals to help us find closure. And while the mourning process and grief often intersect, they are quite different.

According to the Harvard Business Review, grief can come in several forms and may be disguised as, or “feel” like, something else. While that may sound nebulous, it simply means that our “usual” ways of addressing emotion or even distress may not work when deeper grief is involved. Grief is a complex emotional process, a journey — that often is resolved only by working through it over time, sometimes very long periods of time. Grief can affect other aspects of our lives without us even realizing what is happening, occasionally triggering uncharacteristic, even rash actions or decisions that exacerbate the sadness.

Time is often the ultimate healer, but there are ways to shorten grief's duration and intensity, making it easier to cope with. Fortunately, there are some things we can do to better manage through grief. If you are trying to help someone you believe is grieving, rather than asking them what they need, consider offering to help with something you see that needs addressing. Drop by with dinner or offer to run errands with them.

When Is It Grief?

If you've ever lost someone close to you, you probably know exactly what grief feels like and how *you* deal with it. Grief may also be something you'll never get "good" at handling ... and that's okay. Many people report feeling overwhelmed or a surge of difficult or unexpected emotions such as shock, disbelief or guilt in addition to anger or profound sadness. Physically, some people struggle to sleep or eat, conversely, others sleep or eat too much. Some indicate they cannot think straight. Often, there is a correlation between the intensity of these feelings and the significance of the loss.

The five stages of grief were first proposed by author Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*. Simplified, the five stages are:



Now, David Kessler suggests another stage in his new book, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*. These steps don't necessarily come or have to be experienced in order to be grieving.

In the case of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, it's safe to say that many of us in America probably started at the first step as not everyone expected it would come to our shores and inflict the damage it did to society and the economy. Some of us were certainly angry that something so physically small had such a tremendous impact, or maybe we're angry that those in power aren't making the right decisions. The stock market's plunge triggered all sorts of strong emotions from anger to depression, especially for those closer to retirement or otherwise may need those funds soon. And as we pass the lockdown point in many places, we've all begun to (try to) accept bits and pieces of this new normal — some more than others.

For many, events surrounding the outbreak of COVID-19 evoke feelings of frustration, anger, fear, uncertainty, guilt and even sadness. What we might not realize is that underlying grief may be another, less familiar part of the emotional stress that's likely weighing on us during this tough time

— and it should be addressed. You may have felt all or none of the stages of grief recently while coping with forced isolation (social distancing), the loss of your job or, worse, a sickened friend or loved one.

Remember, the greater the loss, the more intense the grief. In its various forms and stages, grief is a process we should be learning to manage along with our “new normal,” where we may find significant changes in our personal and professional lives, even when the worst of the pandemic is over.

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