



City of Vancouver
Fire and Rescue Services

Vancouver
Fire Fighters Association
International Association of Fire Fighters
Local 18



Coping with Grief

The death of a co-worker or friend can have significant impact on individuals. During this difficult time, it is beneficial to learn more about grief. Information can help you understand some of your (or another person's) reactions to the loss. It can also provide reassurance that you will be able to adjust to this loss in your life, even if that might not seem possible right now.

What is grief?

Grief is a reaction to loss. It is more than sadness. Grief can affect your

- actions
- emotions
- thoughts
- body
- spirituality

What kinds of losses might I grieve?

We often think of grief as something that occurs after the death of someone close to us. That is certainly true. Grief can occur following all kinds of other losses in your life as well. You could grieve the loss of anything that was important to you. Some examples of situations in which people might grieve include: disability, illness, divorce, job loss, loss of home or treasured personal possessions, death of a companion animal, being assaulted, experiencing a disaster (e.g., fire, flood, hurricane, tornado), and not achieving an important goal in your life. Most of this handout focuses on grief following a death loss, but the content applies to other losses as well.

Do all people grieve the same way?

Many people have grief reactions that are similar. Yet, grief is very individual. The way you grieve will be influenced by many things, such as who/what you have lost, how a death occurred, your personality, culture, age, gender, other stressors in your life, and how satisfied you are with the support you receive from others. There is no right or wrong way to grieve (as long as you do not hurt yourself or others).

Can grief start before a loss occurs?

Grieving can start even before a loss occurs, when you know that a loss is about to happen. This is called anticipatory grief. Anticipatory grieving might start, for example, if the health of someone close to you is declining, if you are diagnosed with a medical condition that will limit your activities, or if your job is ending. Anticipatory grieving is usually a healthy reaction. It can trigger you to start preparing for the loss and for how you will cope.



Common Grief Reactions

Common grief reactions include those summarized on the next two pages by grief researcher William Worden. Some may seem unusual to you, but all are considered normal unless they continue over a very long period of time or are especially intense. You might have one reaction, several, or many. They might be very strong for a while and then lessen, or they might not be as strong but last for a long time.

Actions:

- Trouble falling asleep or waking up too early
- Eating too much or too little
- Being absent-minded
- Withdrawing from others; feeling less interested in the world
- Dreaming of the deceased
- Avoiding reminders of the deceased
- Searching and calling out the name of the deceased person
- Sighing
- Being restlessly overactive
- Crying
- Visiting places or carrying objects that remind you of the deceased person
- Strongly treasuring objects that belonged to the deceased

Emotions:

- Sadness
- Anger
- Guilt or regret
- Anxiety
- Loneliness
- Fatigue
- Helplessness
- Shock
- Yearning (pining for the person [or whatever you lost]; thinking “if only” this had not happened)
- Emancipation (Not all feelings are negative. Sometimes there is a sense of being released when a loss occurs).
- Relief (May especially be felt after someone dies from a lengthy or painful illness or if your relationship with the deceased was a difficult one).
- Numbness—a lack of feeling (Numbness may actually protect you from a flood of feelings all occurring at the same time).



Common Grief Reactions (Continued)

Thoughts:

- Disbelief, thinking the loss did not happen
- Confused thinking, difficulty concentrating
- Preoccupation, obsessive thoughts about the deceased or what was lost
- Sensing the presence of the deceased, thinking the deceased is still there
- Hallucinations, seeing and/or hearing the deceased

Feelings in the body:

- Hollowness in the stomach
- Tightness in the chest
- Tightness in the throat
- Oversensitivity to noise
- Feeling that nothing is real, maybe even feeling that you are not real yourself
- Breathlessness, feeling short of breath
- Muscle weakness
- Lack of energy
- Dry mouth

Spirituality

- Feeling that you have lost direction in life
- Searching for meaning in the loss
- Questioning your religious or spiritual beliefs

How long does grief last?

The length of time it takes to adjust to a loss is different for each person and in each circumstance. Grieving often takes much longer than people think. If someone has died, you will cope with many new experiences the first year without the person. Some people find the second year is also difficult, as the loss becomes more real to them. It is helpful to be gentle with yourself, allowing as much time as you need to adjust.

It can be comforting to know that grief tends to come in waves, so you will not be distressed constantly. At times you may feel upset and heartbroken, but in between these times, you may be content and enjoy many things. Usually grief reactions start to fade within six months. As time goes on, you will not feel the grief reactions as strongly or as much. In time you can learn to live your life fully and happily despite the loss.

As you adjust to your loss, you might find that grief reactions pop up from time to time, even after many years. This is very common. This grief might be triggered by many things such as songs, a season of the year, birthdays, holidays, anniversaries or special events in your life, which you may wish the deceased could enjoy with you. Usually these grief episodes are short-lived.



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What if grief is hidden from others?

Grief that is hidden from others is called disenfranchised grief. It is the grief you experience if you do not publicly acknowledge or mourn your loss or receive support from others. Grief may be disenfranchised if others do not recognize your relationship to the person who died, if the type of loss is not supported by others, or if there is stigma related to the loss. Examples of losses that some people may not share with others include: the death of an ex-spouse or former friend, the death of a companion animal, the loss of ability, or death from suicide, AIDS, or a criminal act. Grief can also be disenfranchised if others try to “protect” the bereaved by not discussing the loss. This happens sometimes for children, people with intellectual disabilities and the elderly.

If your grief is disenfranchised—not known or supported by others—you may have a harder time adjusting to the loss. To help face such a loss, choose someone whom you trust to talk with about the loss. How you feel about the loss is important. Being able to tell this to an understanding person can be helpful.

Needing someone to talk to? Feeling Suicidal?

Contact your Local Lower Mainland Crisis Society 24/7:

ANYWHERE IN BC: 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)

Lower Mainland: (604)-872-3311

Mental Health Support Line: 310-6789

Online Chat Services (youth): www.youthinbc.com (noon - 1am)

Online Chat Service (adult): www.crisiscentrechat.ca (noon - 1am)

To find a local Counselor visit:

<http://bc-counsellors.force.com/CounsellorSearch>

Call 211 or go to www.bc211.ca

Employment Assistance Program:

www.HomeWeb.ca / 1.800.663.1142.

Visit our very own website for these and many more resources:

www.VancouverCISM.com

