

Thriving and Surviving After the Loss of a Loved One

Linda J. M. Holloway*

Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Psychology and Counseling, Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University, Alabama, USA

***Corresponding Author:** Linda J. M. Holloway, Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Psychology and Counseling, Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University, Alabama, USA.

Received: June 10, 2017; **Published:** June 29, 2017

Death is inevitable; it is something we will all face on our life's journey. The loss of a loved one leaves us feeling empty, sad, alone, and unable to articulate how and what we are feeling. These feelings will vary depending on the relationship the person had with the deceased person, their religion, or worldview about death. Coping with the loss of someone or something is one of life's biggest hurdles. It interrupts a person's state of being causing them to find it difficult to sleep, eat or think clearly. People are so overtaken by the grief of the loss of their loved ones that they want to withdraw from others, and sometimes find it difficult to cope with the excruciating pain they are experiencing. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. There is no time limit as to how long a person might mourn the loss of their loved ones. Yes, you must be able to go on with living your life because life is for those who are alive. Moving on can seem very difficult and perplexing. People who are grieving feel like by getting on with their lives, they have forgotten about their loved ones. They do not want to feel like they are betraying others who are still grieving. In essence, they do not want to appear as if they are not honoring the death of their loved one; however, what this actually indicates is that the sadness and pain has run its course. It is okay to put some normalcy back into your life. Do not allow others to put a timeframe on how long you or how you should grieve.

Grief is the normal response to a person's experience when something or someone has been removed from their life. Many people believe that grief is only about the loss of love ones. Subtle losses in a person's life can also trigger some form of grief. Some triggers for grief can be the loss of a pet, unemployment, relocating to a new geographical location, graduating from college, loss of friendship, boyfriend and girlfriend separation, divorce, transitioning from the military to civilian life, retirement, a miscarriage, loss of health, loss of life dreams, or selling the family home. All these types of losses can cause people to be totally engulfed with a kaleidoscope of emotions. Loss is a very personal thing and there is no need to feel ashamed of how you are feeling. Embrace what you are feeling and accept these feelings as a part of life. Look for ways to move on with your life in a healthier and productive manner.

Some Symptoms of are Grief:

- Denial
- Shock
- Sadness
- Anger
- Confusion
- Guilt
- Disbelief
- Yearning
- Fear
- Excessive crying

- Hopelessness
- Hurtfulness
- Social withdrawal
- Change in sleep patterns
- Hypersensitivity
- Inability to concentrate
- Change in eating habits
- Questioning one's faith
- Numbness
- Feelings of powerlessness
- Overwhelming sense of loss and sorrow
- Loneliness
- Lethargy
- Repetitive thinking about the circumstances surrounding the death
- Grief spasms- These are brief intense feelings of the loss. The survivors can experience these grief spasms years after the loss. They are usually ignited by triggers such as, birthdays, anniversaries, wedding, births, songs, smells or scents. As time passes, the grief spasms tends to diminish.

Complicated grief is prolonged grief where you experience the overwhelming intense emotional sadness of losing a loved one and it never goes away. You feel stuck in a deep state of mourning and feel like you cannot stop thinking about the death. This is all you think about and it totally disrupts your life and relationships with others over an unusual extended period of time.

Symptoms of Complicated Grief:

- Exceptional anger and bitterness over the loss
- Feeling like your life is empty and useless
- Avoiding anything that reminds you of the person
- Looking for the deceased person in familiar places
- Thinking and acting as if the person is still living
- Denying that the death has taken place. You are in shock and disbelief.
- Intense yearning for the deceased person
- Constant thoughts and images about the deceased

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a psychiatrist, in 1969 developed five states of grief. These stages were the bedrock of her clinical studies and how she assisted her clients. Kubler-Ross did not intend for these stages to be lockstep nor did she feel that everyone has to go through the stages. Kubler- Ross believed very strongly that grieving was not a neat little package. She stated that grieving could be a very messy process and as individualized as people are.

Kubler-Ross Five Stages of Grief:

- Denial - "I can't believe this is happening to me".
- Anger - "Why is this happening to me? Who is to blame for this?"

- Bargaining – “Please, can you stop this from happening, and I will _____”.
- Depression – “I am feeling extremely sad; I do not have a desire to do anything”.
- Acceptance – “I have peace about how all this worked out”.

Ways to Cope with Grief and Loss:

There is no magic wand or fairy dust to sprinkle. You might feel the residual effects for months after a major traumatic loss. There is no set amount of time to grieve; it is as individualized as your fingerprints. We all grieve differently but there are some practical measures we can take to assist us with getting through the process of bereavement or loss. Coping well with loss is essential to one’s mental health.

- Express your feelings – Having someone you can talk to about how you are feeling is an excellent method to get your feelings out in the open so you do not keep them pent up inside. Talking out your feelings is a part of the healing process. You should speak with a trusted family member, friend, health professional, or counselor.
- Give yourself permission to feel sad – It’s perfectly normal to feel sad when you are grieving the loss of a loved one. There will be people who tell you to be strong and do not cry. You begin to feel like expressing your emotions will be a sign of weakness, when in fact the opposite is true. Not being able to express how you feel is really a form of weakness.
- Keep your routine – This can seem almost impossible when you are grieving but I highly recommend you keep doing some of the tasks you were engaging in prior to your loss. Being able to have some form of routine helps keep your mind occupied. For example, if you went for walks in the morning continue to do so.
- Try to get the proper amount sleep – Emotional disruption in our lives leaves us feeling tired and unable to get the proper rest our bodies need. It seems like your mind will not shut down and your body finds it difficult to relax. Getting the proper amount of sleep will allow you to function and take care of your own needs. Hence, if your sleep becomes disrupted, please see your family physician for assistance.
- Eat balance meals – Maintaining healthy eating habits during the grieving process will be a challenge because most people lose their appetite. Thus, eating healthy will allow you to stay focused and cope with the process of grief more effectively.
- Avoid alcohol or anything that will numb your pain – These are temporary escapes that only leave you feeling more miserable in the long run. Both drugs and alcohol are very self-sabotaging and addictive.
- Postpone major life changes – Try not to make any major life changes such as: remarrying, moving, selling your home or changing employment. Give yourself plenty of time to adjust to your loss so you can think clearly and not out of your emotions.
- Be patient with yourself – This process might take longer than you expect. You do not have to rush your grieving process or tell yourself that you should be over this by now. Take the time that is needed so you can heal properly.
- Beware of your grief triggers - These are things or events that can set off your emotional volcano and have your feelings in a whirlwind. For example, anniversaries, birthdays, holidays and major milestones or significant event(s) you shared with the person. Share this with others around you so they can be aware and respect how you are feeling.
- Do not allow others to dictate how you should be feeling - Your grief is your own journey and you need to take ownership of how you are feeling. You do not owe any one an explanation for your feelings nor do you need to feel ashamed about your feelings. Embrace your feelings, be in touch with them and express them as you choose for your own personal healing. You do not need to fake how you are feeling. Be okay with where you are in your grieving journey; keeping in mind that grieving is a journey and not a destination.

- Do not allow the “only if feelings” to overcome you – It’s easy to get caught in the “Only If Syndrome”. This is when you continuously beat yourself over the head with “if only I would have_____”. We all have them but we have to remind ourselves we did the best we could and it was out of our control.
- Enjoy your life – It is easy to get stuck on the myth you should be feeling sad all the time. You may feel guilty when you are having fun. Be mindful that your deceased loved one does not want you to live a life of misery. They would want you to be happy involved in fun activities, i.e. watching good movies, going to the park, dinner dates with friends or family members or reading a good book. You have to keep in mind that life must go on for you.
- Honor your love ones – Find ways you can honor the person you have lost. You can do this by establishing a scholarship fund in their name, planting a tree, or creating some other significant memorabilia to keep their legacy alive such as a book, movie, poem or song.
- Write a Letter – You might wish that you could have told your loved one how much you loved them. Write them a letter to assist you with completing any unfinished business you might have with your loved one. This can be very therapeutic so be ready to shed some tears.
- Volunteering – It is easy to feel like giving up, but finding an organization you can donate your time to would be a great way to take your mind off of things. Volunteering to help others will help to give your life some value and knowing that you are helping others will make a world of difference in your life.
- Journaling – Keeping a journal of your feelings can be therapeutic. It allows you talk about things you do not want to share openly.
- Celebrate their life – When holidays come, cook their favorite food in memory of them. There might have been social problems they wanted to bring awareness to that you can donate something to the organization in their memory. Create a memorial in dedication of your loved one. Remember, their legacy can live on through you, others, family, and friends.
- Join a grief support group – Check your local area for a support group. Being able to participate in a support group would allow you to be in the company of likeminded people who are going through what you are experiencing.
- Do not be afraid to seek professional help – Seek professional counseling from someone who has training in grief counseling to assist you with getting through the process.

Losing a loved one can be a very earth shattering experience. You feel as if you cannot go on with your life. You are caught in a whirlwind with feelings of hopelessness. You think no one really understands how you are feeling. Know that you are not alone and others have gone through this journey and survived. Take heart in knowing that it does get better day by day. Do not quit. Hang in there and seek professional help if you need to. Time is essential in the healing process after the loss of a loved one. As the old adage goes, “Time heals all wounds”. The aforementioned tips are a great way start to live a whole and healthier life after the loss of a loved one.

Conflict of Interest

It does not constitute a conflict of interest for the authors.

Recommended Reading and Resources

1. James JW and Friedman R. “The Grief Recovery Handbook”. New York, HarperCollins (1998).
2. Kubler-Ross E. “On Death and Dying”. New York, Macmillan (1969).

3. LeShan E. "Learning to Say Goodbye When a Loved One Dies". New York, Macmillan (1988).
4. Lord JH. "Beyond Sympathy". California, Pathfinder Publishing of California (1994).
5. Rando TA. "Treatment of Complicated Mourning". Champaign, IL., Research Press (1993).
6. Rothman JC. "The Bereaved Parents' Survival Guide". Continuum (1997).
7. Grief Share Group – Worldwide directory of grief support groups (Griefshare).
8. Divorce Care Group – Worldwide directory of support groups for people who are going through a divorce (DivorceCare).
9. Hello Grief – Support groups in the United States for adults and children who are grieving a loss (HelloGrief).
10. National Alliance for Grieving Children - Directory of programs and support groups in the United States for children experiencing grief and loss.
11. Compassionate Friends- National, self-help organization established for grieving the loss of child. Included is a chapter locator for finding support in the United States, as well as, internationally for assistance in other countries (The Compassionate Friends).
12. GriefNet.org – An online support community to assist people who are dealing with grief, death, and major loss, with approximately fifty monitored support groups for both children and adults (GriefNet.org).
13. Using Facebook to Grieve – Memorial pages to grieve the loss of a loved one.
14. National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children
15. M.A. D. D. (Mothers Against Drunk Driving)
16. THEOS – (They Help Each Other Spiritually)
17. C.O.P. S (Concerns of Police Survivors)

Volume SI Issue 1 June 2017

©All rights reserved by Linda J. M. Holloway.