

Tipsheet for Coping with Loss

(web link: <http://armchairpsychology.com.au/copingwithloss.html>)

We can feel grief after all sorts of losses. It is common knowledge that we will grieve the death of a loved one, and that the more we loved and depended on the other, or even that they depended on us (like a child), the more intense the grief. But Psychologists know that there are other factors that impact the grief that we feel. We know that we grieve after all sorts of losses – not just deaths – and that it can feel like someone has died when the facts around our relationship together have changed dramatically. The ending of a relationship, our child leaving home, the loss of a job, the development of a disability, can all be considered losses and need to be grieved. We can even grieve in sympathy for someone close to us, or someone like us. After a natural disaster or a terrorist attack, many people who were not themselves hurt or bereaved experienced feelings of grief and became quite sad. Depending on the other circumstances in our lives – how stressful our lives are, how healthy we are, how expected was the loss – our grieving will be more or less intense.

Q: How can I make the process of accepting my loss easier?

A: Accepting a loss takes time, and includes accepting the loss both emotionally and intellectually. That means you have to allow yourself to think of the lost one, to be aware of the fact that they are no longer there, and that can be a slow process. You will initially want to wrap yourself up in them – maybe you'll go to sleep with their jumper, or even wear their pyjamas instead of your own. At the beginning, thoughts of them, awareness of their role in your life, will feel stronger than the thoughts you had about them when they were with you. Those thoughts can be overwhelming. You have to know that they will not continue at this level of intensity and over time they will take up much less of you, and allow you to move forward in your life.

Let people care for you. Those who care for you will themselves be enriched if you allow them to bring you food, to sit with you, to walk with you. And their closeness, although you may feel little in the early days, will bring you comfort.

Q: How do I deal with the pain experienced?

A: It is important to allow yourself to both feel and express strong feelings. It can help to explore negative and positive feelings about the deceased, e.g. what do you miss about them? And what don't you miss? For some people, there will always be a sense of loss and sadness. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as everyone experiences the pain of loss differently. Lean on your friends and family, and give yourself the chance to mourn. Talk about your loved one, share an anecdote (happy or sad), allow others to cry with you or just sit with you in your pain. The funeral and the days and weeks afterwards will be painful but will assist in the acknowledgement of ending. If it is not a death, but another sort of loss, creating a ceremony to signify an ending will have the same effect. Look after your body by making sure you eat and sleep, and try to do some light exercise in the sunshine. Talk about your feelings, and fears if you have any. Reach out for help when you need it.

Q: How can I adjust to my new "normal" now that they're gone?

A: Coming to terms with new roles and expectations is made easier by reviewing our attitudes, e.g. reviewing priorities, or considering who is helpful and important in your life. We may also need to live our day to day life differently. As change can be stressful in itself, let alone when you're grieving, you might find it takes time to adapt to any changes that have arisen from your loss. Loss can be a catalyst for change and growth, so be kind to yourself, and give yourself the freedom to explore your changed/changing life. It can often be really helpful to talk to a psychologist, who is an expert in supporting change.

Q: How can I move on with my life?

A: Looking after yourself, and having a healthy mind and body, will help you in being able to cope with the emotions that you're experiencing. Tried and true support structures (dear friends and family, your family doctor, support structures at work) should be allowed to play their role. Eventually, new relationships and new ways of being will develop, and will help you in moving forwards. It is important that we also acknowledge and hold our loved ones dear, both present and gone, so finding and nurturing an enduring connection with the deceased will assist in gradually overcoming the grief. This might be a continued ritual, a cherished item, maintaining a daily debrief chat (albeit one-sided); find what works for you and your life.

Q: How can therapy assist me?

A: Talking about the loss in therapy can help in a number of ways. You don't have to be feeling like you're not coping, to get benefit out of seeing a Psychologist. The sorts of things a Psychologist can help you with are: to face the reality of the loss, to identify and express feelings, to discuss how life has changed in practical terms, to provide an opportunity to reminisce, to provide you with time and space to grieve, to reassure you when what you are experiencing is normal, while assisting you to recognise and challenge abnormal behaviours. A Psychologist will support individual differences in grief, and assist in making new meanings and finding hope and reasons to move on.

