



GRIEF

Grieving or mourning occurs whenever we have a loss and have to let go of important relationships, roles, or things, etc. Four stages or phases of grief are generally recognized and I add a fifth because it is so common. These phases often overlap. The feelings of each stage move through us rather like the waves of a tide coming in, one after another and then - eventually - receding. You can block grief or you can lock it in an emotional closet, but to really get past it, you have to let it happen, and cry as much as you need to.

Phase 1: Numbness and disbelief (shocked)

Phase 2: Protest or yearning (angry, irritable)

Phase 3: Despair (grieving, sad, bereft, desperate, hopeless, helpless)

Phase 4: Detachment and moving on (ready to let go, newly relinquished, hopeful, readjusting to your new life without the lost person, with no home, etc.)

Phase 5: Anniversary reactions (Similar feelings come back a year later, or at a special time that reminds you of the original loss you grieved)

LOSS

Death, divorce, job loss, and major house moves, etc. all produce grief in us, especially when the loss is permanent. Among the most devastating of these losses is that of a parent, child or other loved one. Similarly, losing a beloved pet can also cause painful grief. There are innumerable more commonplace losses, too, such as losing a wallet or a favorite piece of jewelry or getting a dent in your new car, which then loses its perfection. Each loss produces some version of grief.

It is **essential to grieve** each loss, no matter how minor or upsetting it may be, or how tired you get of crying about it, or how **vulnerable** crying makes you feel. Otherwise, you stock pile the unfinished grief in an “emotional closet”, and sooner or later the door won’t close, so emotions are likely to come spilling out at very inopportune times. People who say, “Forget about it!” or “Oh, I just get mad,” or “I don’t get mad, I just get even,” or “No big deal, I’ll just get another one” may do so to avoid feeling the pain of grief or perhaps to save face publicly. But they too need to explore their feelings privately, at some point. Facing these feelings avoids carrying the burden of that pain and grief indefinitely.

Open expressions of grief feelings often make other people uncomfortable, and so they may discourage your grieving. They may try to distract you, “Here, have a drink” or to “cheer you up” when you are grieving. Reassure them you are fine and keep grieving when appropriate.



Unfinished grief is a major source of **anachronistic feelings** (old feelings that piggyback on current events.) Such feelings can contribute to depression. The unresolved anger may leak out indirectly or inappropriately too, e.g. in poor frustration tolerance, perhaps, or irritability and aggression or even high blood pressure. Loss is different from change from positive events, which can be just as emotionally wrenching, because loss rarely has positive feelings to counterbalanced the negative.

Complicated losses, such as not getting a required class that you dread taking or not speaking to a difficult parent can produce a murky mixture of conflicting feelings. These events are often harder to grieve than the losses that feel more clearly good or bad.

There are a number of social rituals used to manage the impact of loss. Think of the rituals you have participated in. e.g. funerals. Are there ones you have avoided? Were you trying to avoid dealing with the feelings they evoke? Think of what helps you to tolerate the sadness etc. of loss. Different cultures have traditions for assisting with loss such as blues music, an extremely effective, cultural model for processing grief.

LETTING GO

The losses that impact you often involve others, e.g. parents divorcing or remarrying, moving out of shared housing, seeing friends drop out of school. Remember, it is important to accept whatever feelings you have and not prejudge them. Then process them by thinking, talking and/or crying and writing, and eventually come to terms with them. All this can be done without acting out (or “acting up,” “showing out,” “blowing up” or “losing it,” etc.) **Verbal eloquence** is as powerful a tool to process feelings as drama or violence and far more effective in moving you towards letting go. **Suppressing** or repressing your feelings - pretending to yourself and others that they are not there - may be OK in the very short run but is usually destructive in the long run. This is different from the necessary skill of **containing** your feelings until an appropriate time and place to express them. Practice on minor losses and use **containment** to **compose yourself** after tears.

Nighttime dreams frequently deal with losses in your life, sometimes anticipating inevitable loss and guiding you towards productive management. If you remember a dream of loss, write it in your dream journal and see what you can learn from it.

MOVING ON

When you move on, and accept a loss, it can be a pleasant liberation. You can also take with you many parts of old relationships that you valued or learned from, at the same time as you relinquish the lost person or home, etc.

Get your journal, and write a paragraph about one loss that you have recently experienced. Note the feelings and changes it caused, where you are now in the phases of grief, and how you plan to move on. Be prepared to talk to someone about this experience of journaling grief whenever the opportunity arises.