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HOW TO GET Over Grief

What do we do when someone close dies? Do we 'manage' the pain or 'submit' to it? How do we get over it? Suzan Crane finds the answers.

Death is an inevitable part of life. Usually, the loss hits close to home, but sometimes we grieve for strangers, as the world did recently for victims of the Asian tsunami. Even when it's not on such a scale, grief is the unavoidable result. FEMALE asked experts, and those who have grieved, to guide us through the process of mourning.

Let grief happen

Spiritual, religious and cultural beliefs differ for different people and methods of coping vary, but certain reactions to death – particularly of a loved one – are universal. Most ways of grieving are “a necessary, natural part of the healing process” according to the best-selling book *How To Survive The Loss of A Love*. They are: shock, denial and numbness, followed by fear, anger and depression, and finally, understanding, acceptance and moving on. Symptoms of bereavement also often include feelings of guilt and helplessness, and the emotional impact of the loss can provoke physical maladies such as loss of sleep, appetite and sex drive, difficulty concentrating, and diminished energy. If you feel any one of these, know that it's normal; don't suppress them. Experts advise that those who grieve can fall ill and experience psychological problems if they don't submit to these phases.

True story “My husband died after a battle with cancer and I immediately consulted a doctor to make sure my reactions were normal as I had never felt so emotionally erratic before. I discovered that proper sleep gave me the strength to take care of myself and my children.” Terry, 39

It's a myth that time heals all

According to Russell Friedman, executive director of the Grief Recovery Institute (www.grief.net) and co-author of *The Grief Recovery Handbook* and *When Children Grieve*, the common perception that ‘time heals all wounds’ is a myth that inhibits recovery. He says, “Most people tell us a year or two after the death of a loved one that time not only hasn't healed them, but they feel worse. And they feel they have to hide the pain because it is expected that they ‘should have been over it by now’. So, take your time.

True story “I lost my best friend to a drug overdose almost 10 years ago. He died on my birthday. Initial disbelief and anger gave way to tears when I considered how I'd never see Ross again. We were so young and seemingly indestructible that to realise our mortality was shocking. A support group of friends evolved to reminisce and share feelings. Slowly, I began to accept his death and move on. A friend said: “We don't need to understand, but to appreciate the time we had with him.” Before the service I tucked a Buddha amulet into his pocket – something of mine he could take with him. The funeral took place on my birthday. My journal reads: “Birthday today. Funeral today. Funny, but both a celebration of life.” Every year on my birthday, I remember his death, every time someone mentions Ross's name I smile.” Laurie, 29

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Be honest about your relationship

Recovery from a death relies on an honest appraisal of the relationship. "It is essential to apologise for things

you did or said that might have hurt the other person and to forgive them for the things they did or didn't do that you felt harmed you," says Friedman. There are many emotional statements that must be communicated – indirectly – so that you can finally feel complete.

"Doing this does not mean that you will never be sad again nor miss the person who dies. It means that you are now free to have fond memories not turn painful and to have a life of happiness and joy even though your life is not the same as it might have been," he adds. While we don't forget and may never completely overcome the loss, in doing the emotional work and using the available tools, the pain and sadness eventually wane and we can move forward.

True story "Two years ago my best friend hung herself. Numb and in shock, the reality of her death was almost impossible to accept. I threw myself into arranging the memorial service. Later, I was left with feelings of emptiness, sadness, abandonment and anger. I made a photo collage immortalising our wonderful times together. I wanted to remember her that way: beautiful, vibrant, laughing. The collage helped remove my agonising image of her last day: so sad that she felt suicide was the only option. I often spoke to her at night, wrote in my journal and kept her memory alive. I needed to talk about her, to honour her. Eventually my tears and pain lessened but occasionally I think, "God, I wish she was alive so I could share this with her." I hold on to the thought that she is now with angels, that she can see me, and still shares those moments with me." *Cherei, 25*

We must share

Sharing the undelivered communications with at least one living witness creates completion of the unfinished emotional business that traps

so many people after a loss. It is helpful to seek support from family and friends and, if need be, professional counsellors or grief groups.

True story "When my mother died when I was 35, I stopped eating, couldn't sleep, lost interest in my husband and had little patience for friends. The process of grieving really started when I began seeing a therapist and later joined a grief group. It helped to hear other people's stories, to realise bereavement is a universal experience. There was a man in his 80s who had lost his wife of 50 years. And while others were urging me to forget the past and move on, Walter and I would spend

Rituals are healing aids

Rituals can be powerful aids towards healing. They can be religious or societal such as

funerals, cultural such as the Chinese ritual of *Ching Ming* where family members of the dead visit their graves and conduct prayers there, or even personal, such as naming a star after that person, or hanging a Christmas ornament for the deceased.

True story "As a single woman without family close by, my pets have become my family. When one dies, the loss is devastating, and once, when I had to put down a dog, I chose home euthanasia, which allowed me to have a more meaningful ceremony in their final hours. I would burn candles, play music and hold them as they received the final injection so they would leave this world surrounded by love." *Patty, 34*

As Friedman says, the key to grieving is to "express your feelings, accept your powerlessness over death, avoid making major decisions, allow yourself the time and space necessary to grieve, do things you enjoy, don't push yourself and nurture yourself". ♀

