

The Church of the EPIPHANY

Lighting the Way to Christ



Support Through the Grieving Process

Grief has been defined as a natural and necessary reaction to a significant change or loss in our lives. These key words in that definition however, natural and necessary, pose a significant challenge to people in our culture.

Natural and necessary

People sometimes have the mistaken impression that feelings associated with grief are unnatural. This is not true. We all experience minute episodes of grief (change) in our daily lives that come and go with little

notice. These situations may seem relatively insignificant, like finding your first gray hair. Rarely do we identify the feelings associated with these situations until we encounter or accumulate more significant losses (changes).

When we experience a major loss however, our reactions are often much stronger. In these cases, grief can manifest itself in ways that cause us to question or doubt our own physical and/or mental well-being. For example, people who are grieving major losses can have difficulty concentrating or focusing. When a person is in the midst of a severe grief reaction, maintaining a daily routine (bathing, eating, etc.) can become a sizable challenge. They may have trouble sleeping, or may experience a lack of energy or loss of appetite. Activities that once were easy may become very difficult. People who are grieving often behave, think or feel differently than they did before the loss occurred. Their lives no longer follow the well-established patterns that previously defined their world. Major losses disrupt and threaten normal routines and cause people to feel as if their lives are out of control. This can also produce a temporary state of depression. If these feelings of hopelessness or helplessness persist longer than 6 months or become overwhelming, professional help may be necessary to help maneuver through these difficult times.

Change and Loss

We experience minor changes and losses to some extent every day. For example, losing a glove or umbrella may cause a bit of inconvenience. These are rather common life experiences that we tend to ignore. The extent to which we react to any loss is dependent upon how significant the loss is and the amount of change that accompanies the loss. Minor losses may be upsetting enough to elicit a response (discovering that you lost an umbrella when it is pouring outside), but cannot compare to the fear and pain we feel when a loved one dies.

If you learned at an early age to hide feelings or refrain from expressing the disappointments of life, it may be difficult for you to know how to respond when more dramatic events occur. The key to accepting and adapting to the changes/losses is learning how to express feelings as each event occurs. Certain changes in life invariably challenge anyone's ability to cope. Examples include moving to a different town or new home, having our children leave home or losing a job. Other changes/losses like a separation, divorce or death are so dramatic that they can threaten anyone's ability to cope.

Ways of dealing with grief

Grief is a complex process that could take weeks, months or in some cases, years to complete. Each loss produces a new chapter in the grieving process and as time passes, we gain a deeper understanding of the depth of each loss.

For example, if my spouse dies in the winter time, I will sadly remember the quiet moments we spent in front of the fireplace. After a few months, I begin to adjust to my new world. In the spring however, a new loss arrives when I realize that the garden is yet another reflection of their absence.

Each person needs their own special way to deal with grief and we offer the following suggestions:

- Sharing - caring family members and trusted friends can be very helpful by listening to us tell our story.
- Support Groups - an opportunity to meet other people who are also struggling after the death of a loved one.
- Professional Counselors - Grief counselors are specially trained people who can help you through this difficult time.
- Referrals - Family Service counselors at The Catholic Cemeteries can help you find the professional help you need.

Rituals of Remembering

Rituals play an important role in dealing with loss. It often begins with a visit to the cemetery to choose a resting place (crypt, grave or niche), and continues with a funeral/memorial mass and interment. Finally, it will involve the placement of a memorial stone/marker which will serve as a permanent tribute to the deceased.

Many people visit the resting place of their loved one at regular intervals like birthdays and anniversaries. Our culture has also established Christmas Day, Memorial Day, Veteran's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day and Independence Day as regular times to place wreaths and flowers at the resting place. This is a way to continually remember your loved ones as a very real part of your life.

Talking to God in prayer enables us to communicate our anger, fears and inability to understand. Taking quiet time each morning and night to talk to God can lead us back to believe that our prayers are heard. God will support us in our journey and understands our unbelief. Prayer can be a real comfort during difficult times.

Having masses said and attending them, gives us a public opportunity to acknowledge our grief and remember the deceased. Remembering birthdays, anniversaries and other special events are an important part of ritualization. Gather family and friends together at those times to tell stories, reaffirm memories and to celebrate life.

Grief is Healthy

In some cultures, people wear black clothing for one full year after the death of a family member, as a symbol of grief that lets the world know of their loss. In western culture, we have thrown away most of the 'old world' signs of bereavement. Rather than shedding tears, angrily shouting at God, and experiencing distractedness or forgetfulness, as signs that we have experienced a significant loss, we tend to isolate from friends and hide our sorrow.

Grieving is a process that people pass through in order to accept their losses. Grief is a natural human response which serves a very necessary and useful purpose. Avoiding the grief does not make the feelings go away or bring the dead back to life. The only way to get beyond the grief and resume some of the healthy activities in our lives, is to realize that we never get over it but can learn to go through it.

The journey of grief is a very personal one and each person travels that distance in their own unique way. After awhile, you forget that you are embarking on a journey and can look back to see where you started. This is a frightening position for some people who fear that they will forget the loved one if life gets back to normal. Rest assured, you never forget.

Take Care of Yourself

Eat nutritious foods at regular meal times. Although the feeling of hunger can disappear during periods of stress, grief is a time when good nutrition is most important. Multiple servings of fresh fruit, vegetables, and foods rich in protein (eg. whole grains) is good medicine for grief and helps maintain our strength.

Keep to a regular sleep schedule. Get plenty of rest during times when the rest of the world is also sleeping. One of the most noticeable symptoms of grief is low energy. Indulge yourself with a nap when you get tired. If you are concerned about sleeping too much or not enough, contact your physician.

Get enough exercise and fresh air. A walk with a friend, regular exercise or even walking alone are natural antidotes for depression.

Be creative. Create a chronicle of your journey that reflects the challenging and refreshing aspects of your life.

Remember That Your Life Has Changed

It may take a long time to adjust to the loss. Be gentle with yourself. Allow yourself to receive the care you need.

The cemetery offers traditional ground burial and offers in ground and above ground cremation burials.