



# Grief



*There are things that we don't want to happen but have to accept, things we don't want to know but have to learn, and people we can't live without but have to let go. ~Author Unknown*

*It's so curious: one can resist tears and 'behave' very well in the hardest hours of grief. But then someone makes you a friendly sign behind a window, or one notices that a flower that was in bud only yesterday has suddenly blossomed, or a letter slips from a drawer... and everything collapses. ~Colette*

## *Some general comments on Grief...*

When a person experiences a loss, especially the loss of a friend or loved one through death, they do not need to read a pamphlet. They need to talk to and be around others. This information is designed to briefly outline and describe the grief process. *It is not designed to replace caring human contact.* If you or someone you know is grieving, the most important thing to do is talk to others. While some people prefer to be alone in the process, it is never good to be totally alone. If someone has difficulty reaching out for help, offer it. If you have difficulty asking for help, ask anyway. Most of the time, it's just good to talk. As human beings, the only way to get through the pain is to go through it. You don't have to be alone.

Grief can be defined as a "keen mental suffering or distress over affliction or loss." The loss of a friend or loved one by death is not the only event required to experience grief. The feeling of Grief can be the result of different things: retirements, divorce, destruction of possessions through flood or fire, moving to a new location, losing a job and so on. Any situation that involves the *perception* of loss is a candidate for the grieving process to begin.



For some IMSA students, leaving friends and home begins a grieving process almost as soon as they get on campus. They miss the familiar sights and sounds of home and not returning to their home school can be experienced as a loss. They are leaving old friends, siblings and even pets. It does not have to be a disastrous, overwhelming loss to experience grief. A simple change in the environment or our personal lives can cause us to feel as if we have just lost something important. IMSA parents go through a similar experience. They have a child leaving home sooner than expected and they now have to engage in "long distance parenting." It can be hard to trust their child to someone else's care, especially if it is far away from home. In addition, no two people grieve in quite the same way. This is a very personal process that varies in terms of severity and time. Some people go through identifiable stages when they grieve, others do not. There are, however, some common elements in the grieving process that deserve mention.

- Grief and mourning are normal reactions to a traumatic event or loss and are *not* a form of mental illness.
- Although many individual reactions may seem unusual, most reactions are within a normal range considering the circumstances.
- The grief period usually takes longer than most people recognize. Six months to two or three years is not an unusual period of grieving, depending on how the severity of the loss is perceived by the person.
- Periods of grieving may be aroused by unexpected events, including the anniversary date of the loss
- Telling and re-telling the story about the trauma or sharing memories about the loss, deceased friend, or loved one is not morbid. It is, in fact, almost always helpful. Some people simply "don't want to talk about it", but eventually they will need to; even if it is only to one other person.

The following can be used as a general guideline.

#### **Normal Grief Reactions**

Dullness of senses  
Loss of appetite  
Restless sleep  
Obsessive thinking  
Crying and sadness  
Guilt feelings  
Anger

#### **Inappropriate Grief Reactions**

Total withdrawal from activities  
Major changes in eating habits  
Prolonged sleeplessness/over-sleeping  
Wishes of reunion with the deceased  
Thoughts and feelings about suicide  
Wish to punish self for past wrongs  
Rage attacks or excessive outbursts

Hostility  
Lack of energy  
Difficulty concentrating  
Wide range of emotions

Aggression toward others  
Chronic fatigue; sleep disorders  
Disordered and chaotic thinking  
Few emotions; blunted affect

## ***Bowlby's Phases of Grief***

John Bowlby is an English researcher who has studied loss extensively. He found that the usual stages involved in accepting one's own personal death or the death of a friend or loved one, do not necessarily describe the way we begin the grieving process. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross initially discovered that dying people go through the identifiable stages of Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. She later found that people did not go through the stages in any predictable order, jumped from early to later stages, regressed to earlier stages, and often repeated stages given their personal circumstances. Bowlby was able to isolate phases that seem more specific to those who are left behind. His four phases of the grief process are outlined below.

- ❖ There is a **phase of numbing** that usually lasts from a few hours to a week and may be interrupted by outbursts of extremely intense distress and/or anger. In this phase you feel nothing or have trouble identifying what you feel. Then, almost without warning, you feel intensely sad, distressed, upset, or angry.
- ❖ There is a **phase of yearning and searching** for the lost person lasting months and sometimes for years. The intensity decreases over time, but can initially be very intense. This is often a terribly strong desire to see the person one more time or a belief that they will be back soon or be found unharmed.
- ❖ There is a phase of **disorganization and despair** when the reality of the death or loss can no longer be denied or avoided. Many emotions are now evident and almost always involve intense feelings of depression. The reality that the person is not coming back sets in. You may not know what to do or where to go and wonder how anyone can live with such a realization. **It is in this phase, when the feelings return, that some people have thoughts of suicide and seriously consider ending their lives.**
- ❖ There is a phase of **greater or lesser reorganization** as the mourner adjusts to the loss. You begin to see life as going on without the friend or loved one. It is at this point that feelings of guilt occur, sometimes referred to as "survivors-guilt." Perhaps one of the most difficult stages: you must establish a new relationship with the lost one and decide to bring that new sense of the relationship into your life as you heal and go on.

These phases are seldom clear-cut and rarely experienced in any specific order. Most people who are grieving oscillate back and forth between the stages depending on circumstances and their ability to deal realistically with the loss. However, most of the issues described above come up at one time or another when we grieve. If anything at all can be said, this is normal.

It is painful, but it is normal. Again, the only way to get through the pain is to go through the pain. You don't have to go through it alone.

## ***Tasks of the Grieving Process*** ***(What are we supposed to get out of all this pain?)***

**Accept the reality of the loss.** People who are grieving should be encouraged to talk about the death or loss. This can help the bereaved understand both emotionally and intellectually that the loss has occurred.

**Experience the pain of grief.** In accepting the painful reality of the loss, the emotional pain is allowed to run its course. If the pain is not experienced and eventually disclosed, it may surface at some later time in the form of somatic problems, severe depression or loss of emotional expression. This is often called a "delayed grief response." Whether embracing the pain of grief is delayed, avoided or ignored, it must eventually be experienced. Unfortunately, this kind of pain must be integrated (brought into our lives in a meaningful way) and not erased.

**Adjust to an environment in which the friend or loved one is missing.** The survivors are usually not aware of all the roles the deceased person played until after they are gone. Learning new skills by performing necessary tasks previously done by the deceased can help the survivors assume increasing responsibility for his or her own life.

**Withdraw emotional energy invested in the deceased and invest it in new relationships.** This is one of the most necessary components of recovering from the loss of a friend or loved one. We do not forget. We never forget. But we bring them into new relationships with the living so that we may live again.



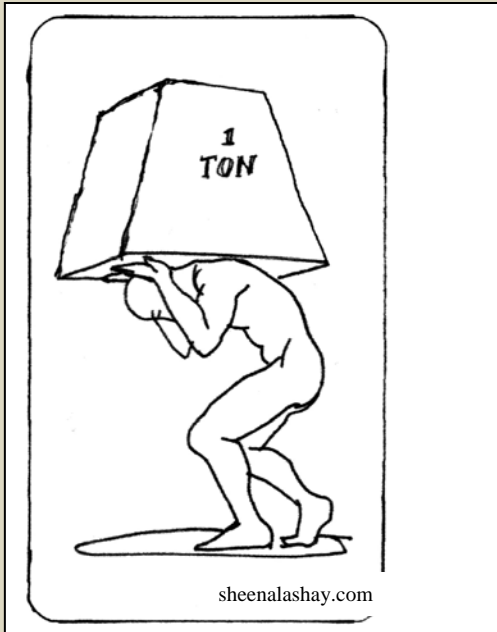
## *Suggestions for helping yourself through Grief*

Some of these suggestions may sound like an “easy solution” or just plain dumb! Whether you are grieving the loss of a friend or loved one, or grieving the change in your environment and the loss of friends, you could still *do something*. Again, some people prefer to keep things to themselves and grieve alone. Some never open up about what they are feeling, or may do so many months or years after the loss. We recommend that you take some of these suggestions sooner rather than later. They do not all involve talking to someone about your internal pain. Some of these suggestions are just common sense, but they can get you through some very tough times.

1. Be gentle with yourself. Don't rush around too much. Rest. Your body needs the extra energy for repair.
2. Don't take on new responsibilities right away. Don't over extend. Keep decision making to a minimum until you feel like you are in a better place: that could be in 1 to 6 months... it is different for everyone.
3. Accept help and support when offered. Even if you hate doing this, let people take care of you in little ways: just hang out, watch a movie, do some gaming, go for a walk and so on.
4. Try and connect with someone. It's okay to need comforting. Seek it out.
5. Just be around people in a “non-intimate” place; like walking around a park or shopping mall.
6. Schedule comforting activities during particularly difficult times.
7. Allow yourself to feel the pain. Let the grief/healing process run its course.
8. Be patient with yourself. Try not to be hard on yourself. Healing takes time.
9. Remember it is okay to feel depressed. Suicidal thinking is not a normal reaction and it should be addressed as soon as possible. Feeling depressed *is* a normal reaction.
10. It is alright to cry. There are actually chemicals that are released that can make you feel some relief. Uncontrollable crying is not unusual for brief periods of time.
11. Read books for f
12. Read. There are many helpful books on grief. If grief is understood, it is a little easier to handle.
13. Good nutrition is important to help the healing process.
14. Moderate exercise, especially walking, helps to work off the frustration.
15. Keep a journal. It is a good way to understand what you are feeling/thinking.
16. Plan new interests or take time for activities you enjoyed in the past.
17. Plan things to look forward to, no matter how small.
18. Do something for someone else. Call a friend and listen, spend time with loved ones, reach out to a child, volunteer.
19. Remember that you will get better. Hold onto hope/better days will be back. You will develop a renewed sense of purpose.
20. It is OK to be angry. Don't push it down. Let it out. Go to an open field and walk it off. Talk about your anger with someone you trust.
21. Other ideas: take a hot relaxing bath; sit in the sun; take time for yourself; watch TV; go out for dinner.
22. Do not have unrealistic expectations of yourself. Grief takes time.
23. Put balance in your life: read, rest, work, play, and get exercise and recreation.

*Seek the help of a pastor or counselor if grief is unresolved*

## A word about guilt.



Guilt and worry are members of the same family. Both can feel as if you are carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. If a friend or loved one passes away by whatever means, there can be all kinds of guilt feelings. There can be things you wished had been said or done in the relationship. There can be unresolved issues and feelings, especially about incidents that have occurred in the past that were hurtful or involve your personal perceptions of the past situation. When the person is lost due to severe illness or injury, you may wish you could have taken their place somehow. We tend to ask “Why them and why now?” It is normal to feel like this when in a powerless situation. Eventually it comes down to this: there was nothing you could have done or said that would have changed the situation and kept the person safe. There may have been thoughts or feelings that remain unresolved.

Maybe you should have taken some responsibility in communicating some of these feelings. However, you will come to realize that you are truly powerless of what happened, even if you have regrets. Regrets are normal and can help us to make different decisions in the future. It might help to remember that the past cannot be changed, no matter how much we wish for it. Some things can still be resolved in the present and some things just have to be accepted. That’s why talking to someone can help sort out what you should and should not take responsibility for. There is a label for not doing this. It is often referred to as “inappropriate guilt” or “pathological guilt.” This when we let the guilt feelings build to the point where we are convinced we are in the wrong, even if the evidence says the opposite or there is no evidence to support the feeling. Such feelings can be held for years if they are not expressed. Only person to person contact in an open and honest conversation can help put these feelings to rest. Choose someone you can trust and talk to them.

Guilt can also be experienced when there is no physical loss of a person through death. IMSA kids lose people, places and things when they come to school here.

They lose friends, their bedroom, home cooking, watching their little brother grow up, and being at home to take care of someone, or feel like they are abandoning their family in some kind of way. Most students try to maintain friendships at home and make new ones at IMSA. Sometimes the home relationships slip away and you feel there is something you should have done to prevent it. People may actually blame you for “leaving home” and changing everything. This can make you feel like it was you who caused their feelings of loss and you are the only one who can fix it. But you are here and they are there. Again, feelings of powerlessness are common when trying to deal with feelings of guilt.

So, guilt can be a complex emotion, composed of many different variables like loss, self-blame, remorse, regret, self-loathing, and fear (only to name a few). Sometimes the main reason people don’t want to talk about such strong emotions is the fear that it all might be true. They are actually responsible or they actually did cause all the pain. Even if some parts of this are true, it must be part of the healing process to deal with those specific feelings. Forgiveness of self and others is the final and most important goal for unresolved guilt. It can take time to accomplish this; sometimes a lot of time. Just remember that the whole thing is a process. You can go through it and you can get through it and eventually find yourself in a place that feels real and free from guilt. The process should be started as soon as possible. Don’t wait to share these kinds of feelings. Sharing will help you sort out what is your responsibility and what is not while keeping you connected to another human being. ***Remember, it’s hard to do all this alone.***



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