

1-2005

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Recommended Citation

Murray, Susan E., "GRIEF IS...Coping with Loss" (2005). *Lake Union Herald*. 636.
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/luh-pubs/636>

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GRIEF IS...

COPING WITH LOSS

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

The pain of grief is just as much a part of life as the joy of love; it is, perhaps, the price we pay for love, the cost of commitment. In this new year, grief will likely come to each one of us in some way. I invite you to consider these thoughts about grief:

Grief is a natural, normal, and understandable reaction to losing a beloved person. It varies from person to person and is expressed through a wide range of emotions, thoughts, and behavior.

Grief is often characterized as acute “pangs,” evoked by reminders of the loss. A pang of grief may be sadness, severe anxiety, or yearning to be with our loved one again. We want to experience the affection, guidance, reassurance, and companionship provided by the relationship. During these pangs of grief, those who are grieving often weep for their lost loved one, and that’s okay.

Grief is a beneficial and necessary reaction to significant loss. Grief should not be regarded as undesirable or destructive. Although grief reactions may be distressing, especially at first, they also provide comfort, reassurance, and relief.

Grief is both public and private. Obituaries, the funeral, formal and informal conversations—these are the public rituals that help us remember, honor, and reflect on the life and contributions of our loved one, while acknowledging the reality of their death. The private side is highly personal and involves our private thoughts, feelings, and personal rituals. These can include dreaming about the person, yearning for his smile, trying to be more like the person, doing what would make her proud.

Grief is symbolic. We miss the physical presence and the things the relationship gave us. We can miss the love, affection, companionship, sense of belonging, information, advice, and reassurance that individual contributed to our lives. Grief reflects the uniqueness, personal meaning, and value we experienced in the relationship.

Grief is dynamic; it fluctuates over time. It’s a process of ongoing adjustment and adaptation. Grief reactions don’t typically decrease over time in an orderly fashion. They fluctuate in their frequency and intensity. Fluctuation in our grieving is often due to loss reminders or situations and circumstances that remind us of our loved one’s presence.

Grief is often an extended process. Our grief for a person is likely to last as long as we feel the absence of that person and the lost relationship. These reactions can last for months, years, decades, and often a lifetime. Healthy grieving does not require forgetting.

Grief is remembering. It is not about forgetting or cutting off our emotional ties to the person who is gone. It helps us make the necessary emotional, mental, and physical adjustments to the loss that will help us get on with our lives. A major part of this work is finding a suitable place for our loved one in our ongoing life. We could say the relationship needs to be re-formed so it becomes one of memory instead of physical presence. This permits us to create new and rewarding relationships and life activities.

There is no universally “normal” way to grieve. To say that grieving is a predictable and consistent progression through a series of universal stages is misleading. We now understand that the grief process is highly variable in its symptoms and intensity—across individuals and cultures.

In the end, we all have this promise from Revelation 21:4—“He will wipe away all tears from our eyes, and there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor pain. All of that has gone forever” (TLB).

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