



Coping With Loss For First Time

By **RICHARD ASA** Tribune Newspapers

When you're young, the distinct pain of grief may be felt with the loss of a beloved pet. Sometimes years go by, though, before a family member or close friend dies.

Losing someone close to you for the first time is overwhelming. The grief is an unexpected cascade of treasured memories intertwined with feelings of incomplete, unexpressed emotions. In "On Death and Dying," author Elizabeth Kubler-Ross described the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

Denial is the first stage that will hit you when someone you love dies. It opens the door to what is to come.

Kubler-Ross and David Kessler, in the book's new edition, "On Grief and Grieving," explain that denial comes first to help you survive the loss. During this stage, "the world becomes meaningless and overwhelming. Life makes no sense. We are in a state of shock and denial. ... We go numb."

Really, we just want to run away.

Denial must be met head-on though, because it starts the grieving and healing process.

"Do your best to remain self-aware in the face of the emotions that will surge," says Virginia A. Simpson, a Sacramento, Calif., bereavement care specialist and author of "The Space Between," a book about caring for her dying mother.

"Acknowledge that thoughts such as 'I can't handle this' or 'I'm not strong enough' are just a story you are telling yourself."

Expressing feelings, negative and positive, is important. “You can't avoid the enormity of the situation,” says Judy Rosenberg, a Los Angeles-based clinical psychologist. “Along with the death of a person comes the death of precious memories and feeling of incomplete, unexpressed emotions. ... Expression allows you to heal and move on.”

If you are able, being at the bedside of a dying friend or family member can help blunt the pain of denial . Although the paradox of denial is that it can keep you from being there, being part of the dying process can help you through the other stages and lead you toward acceptance.

“Because most people are intimidated by the dying process, they tend to leave the bedside before they have said their final goodbyes,” Rosenberg says. “When death is not appropriately grieved, you bear the burden of feeling incomplete. This sense of incompleteness can show up as guilt, nightmares and a general feeling of suppressed emotions.”

The unexpected loss of someone you love calls for true courage. Chicago therapist David Klow believes that while many people might shrink from the unexpected experience, they would benefit by remaining open to it and “leaning into the feelings.”

“Most people worry they will become too overwhelmed by emotions (but) being able to feel what we are going through in the moment actually allows for a healthier grieving process,” he says.

Kids can benefit from learning early on about loss not related to death. Dealing with leaving one school for another, losing a friend who moves away or breaking an object that had special meaning can help create understanding of grief.

“In our society, we're often told to ‘get over it,’ which is just about the worst advice ever,” says Kriss Kevorkian, a Los Angeles-area thanatologist, a person who studies death and dying. “Sit with your grief, find the meaning in it through appreciating that fact that you have loved ones that you care for.”

There's no way to avoid grieving, Kevorkian says. It will come no matter how much you try to resist. "Allow it to unfold," she says. "Grief ... teaches us to appreciate life and those we love. Instead of pushing it aside, embrace it and learn to truly be grateful for every day."

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