It is natural and normal for people to experience loss in their lives and to have feelings of sadness and sorrow. The losses experienced in addiction often bring additional and intensified feelings of grief. When the loss is perceived to have been preventable, it often adds to our sense of despair. The more attachment you had to a person, or to a thing, the more likely you are to grieve the loss. Grieving is a process. It is an emotional journey of learning to cope with loss, and it can last a long time. The normal grieving process allows us to let go and continue moving on in a healthy way. This lesson will help you understand the normal process of grieving and distinguish it from complicated grief. Additionally, you will learn the emotions and behaviors that frequently accompany loss and discover strategies for managing grief.

This lesson is available at journeytorecovery.com
“It is natural and normal to mourn the loss of anything that is morally good or even morally neutral. However, destructive or inappropriate grief can lead to serious depression. We grieve for that which we have lost because we have become attached to certain people, places, ideas, and things. The extent of the grief is determined by the degree of attachment we had, whether appropriate or otherwise.” (Anderson and Baumchen, 1999)

STAGES OF GRIEF

Grieving is a process. It is an emotional journey of learning to cope with loss, and it can last a long time. The normal grieving process allows us to let go and continue moving on in a healthy way.

People typically go through a predictable cycle when they experience loss.

Normal

- Shock and denial: confusion and fear
- Anger: feel anxious, irritated
- Depression and withdrawal: lack energy, feel helpless
- Bargaining and searching: begin to reach out, search for meaning in the situation
- Acceptance: Look ahead again, make plans

A New “Normal”

List recent losses in your life. Include lost relationships, jobs, and career. Also list deaths, moves, jail or prison time, divorce, etc.

___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________
POTENTIAL CHALLENGES

As people navigate the grief process, there may be times they seem very disorganized and have trouble concentrating. They may have some difficulty remembering things and find even day-to-day living a challenge. Depression and a general sense of being tired are common, as are losing weight, trouble sleeping, and feeling guilty. This can last for weeks or months.

Although these stages are predictable, they are not linear. Everyone responds to grief differently and may navigate them in a different order.

Several factors may influence a person’s reaction to loss and affect the severity and duration of each stage, including:

- Mental state and stability
- Support system
- Nature of the relationship
- Beliefs and past experiences
- Circumstances of the death or loss

COMPLICATED GRIEF

Instead of acceptance, some fall into depression and hopelessness, which can develop into a more serious problem called complicated, or destructive, grief. Many symptoms of complicated grief are similar to the natural process of grief, but instead of gradually subsiding, they persist for more than six months, and may even increase. Many describe feeling “stuck,” with the inability to pull themselves out of a heightened state of mourning.

Signs and symptoms of complicated grief can include:

- Persistent, painful yearning for loved one
- Constant thoughts and images of loved one
- Unrelenting anger and bitterness
- Desperate loneliness and helplessness
- Heavy drinking or substance abuse
- Continued denial of the death
- Severely disrupted sleep
- Inability to function normally
- Inability to trust others
- Isolation
- Wanting to die
- Total loss/absence of meaning and purpose

Consider a recent loss in your life. What were some of your emotions and behaviors?

- Isolation
- Irritability
- Alcohol and drug use
- Restlessness
- Insomnia
- Increased depression
- Moodiness
- Low frustration tolerance
- More arguments
- Anger at deceased
- Anger at self
- Anger at God
- Increased shopping or spending
- Using gambling as a distraction
- Appetite disturbance
- Hopelessness
- Helplessness
- Suicidal thoughts
- Unpleasant thoughts
- Self-harm thoughts
- Self-injuring behaviors such as cutting or burning
- Guilt
- Increased desire for relationships

The normal grieving process allows us to LET GO AND CONTINUE MOVING ON in healthy ways.
REACHING OUT

Who could you talk to about your grief?
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
Consider the following possibilities:
- Family member
- Spouse
- Parent
- Close friend
- AA group
- Sponsor
- Grief support group
- Member of the clergy
- Counselor
- Sibling
- Someone at a grief or depression hotline
- ____________________________
- ____________________________

Looking at the list above, who could you approach?
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

RISK FACTORS

While researchers don’t know specifically what causes complicated grief, they have identified some factors that may increase the risk of it developing. These factors include:
- Loss was perceived as preventable
- Loss was traumatic, sudden, premature, or a suicide
- History of depression, anxiety, or other types of emotional instability
- The relationship had unresolved issues or conflict
- Significant emotional dependence on who or what was lost
- Lack of a support system
STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING GRIEF

- **Allow yourself to feel the pain.** Grieving is a painful, but necessary, process. You need to work through the difficult emotions and allow yourself to heal.

- **Be patient with yourself.** The process takes time. Your recovery may look very different than someone else's. You need to work through things at your own pace, and on your own terms.

- **Talk things out.** Find a trusted, compassionate friend or family member who is a good listener. Get together with them consistently and allow yourself to talk, cry, and express your emotions.

- **Avoid unnecessary changes.** Wait for a few months before adding additional stressors to your life, such as moving or changing jobs. Maintaining some normalcy will help give you a sense of security.

- **Take care of your body.** Eat healthy, nutritious food, get plenty of exercise, and try to maintain a regular sleep schedule. Physical activity releases stress and helps you sleep and feel better.

- **Confront difficult emotions and feelings of regret.** Forgive yourself, learn from it, and move on. Get help if you are feeling stuck.

- **Avoid self-medicating.** Falling into the habit of dulling your pain with alcohol and drugs will only make things worse.

- **Plan ahead for special occasions.** The first Christmas, birthday, anniversary, and other holidays may be difficult. Plan to do something special with others who understand and identify with your pain and loss. Create new memories.

- **Stay connected.** Be intentional about spending time with people who can make you laugh and will let you cry. Pursue uplifting and supportive friendships. Perhaps join a social club or volunteer for a cause valued by your loved one.

- **Set new goals.** Choose to look forward to the future. It may be as simple as planning a weekend away or learning a new skill. Do something proactive to help yourself find enjoyable activities.

- **Join a grief support group.** It is therapeutic to be with people experiencing similar emotions and challenges.

BE PATIENT WITH YOURSELF

Grief is not linear, but is a process, and it can be a long journey. Learning to cope with loss strategically, staying connected to and talking with others, and being patient with yourself will help you through. You can get better, heal from emotional wounds, handle responsibilities again, and return to a more normal pattern of life. No one processes at the same pace as another. Take the time you need to work through these real and raw emotions.

SOURCES