

THE GRIEF PROCESS

Grief is a process that enables the bereaved to regain a sense of balance and integration into their lives. This process is not only a functional necessity but a form of healing. The following time frame demonstrates in a general way the course grief takes in a healthy bereavement.

Phase 1: Notification of Death. (This phase may last as long as 72 hours.)

Behaviors during this phase include shock, confusion, inability to comprehend the reality, and disorganization. The degree of shock is in direct proportion to the lack of preparedness and emotional investment in the deceased.

Phase 2: Funeral Preparation/Notifying Family.

Functions are performed in a mechanical manner; rapid mood swings; physical/emotional exhaustion. The bereaved person is in emotional overload. In order to keep one's psyche intact the griever gives little time to what happened.

Phase 3: Loss of Support System. (This phase may last from 2–8 weeks.)

Sense of abandonment; overwhelming sadness; changes in appetite with significant weight loss/gain; change in sleep patterns; lack of concentration; short term memory loss; impaired judgment; and depressed motivation. Family and friends have returned to their homes and work. The bereaved may or may not have returned to work.

Phase 4: Grieving Process. (This phase ranges between 3–6 months.)

Manifestations of sorrow; changes in physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions. There may be acting out of strong emotions; physical distress; sudden expression of sadness and tears brought about by the mundane and trivial; zealous prayer or abandonment of religious practices.

Phase 5: Living With Aloneness. (Usually occurs around six months.)

Experience of physical emptiness; feels violated; sharp intense pangs of grief. Feels deprived. Fearful of accepting invitations on the one hand and hurt if invitations are not offered. Fearful of being overcome by mental suffering.

Phase 6: First Anniversary.

This can be a period of mild apathy, depression, low energy. These feelings are associated with events meaningful to both parties, such as birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, vacation times.

Phase 7: Reconciliation. (Anywhere from 4 months to 3+ years depending on the nature of the death, and degree of emotional investment.)

Seeks to understand the death; begins to integrate loss into present life; deals with thoughts of the deceased; periods of being emotionally labile in remembering. Makes conscious decision to recover; asks for and accepts support from others.

Grief will manifest itself. If it is not experienced and expressed within the emotional dimension, it will be expressed to the physical, mental and spiritual dimensions in a manner that may be harmful to the individual. Healthy bereavement means owning the pain and allowing grief to be felt to its fullest, without chemical intervention that merely postpones the inevitable.