



## WHEN SOMEONE YOU LOVE DIES

*“I never could have prepared myself for all of the feelings I had when my husband passed away.”*

— Doris, 74 year-old retired teacher

When a loved one dies, you may feel many emotions. With a death of a spouse, partner, family member or friend comes the loss of companionship, security, and shared experiences. It can take time for you to completely accept and adjust to the loss.

### What Is Grief?

Grief is a physical and emotional reaction to the death of a person close to you. This person could be a spouse, partner, family member, long-time friend, or even acquaintance. The way you grieve is unique to you. Your connection to the person who has died, your heritage, your upbringing, and your life experiences all have an impact. When you grieve, you may have many emotions. Many people feel more than one emotion at a time:

- Relief
- Anger
- Guilt
- Depression
- Confusion
- Shock
- Stress
- Despair
- Loneliness
- Sadness
- Sense of Unreality
- Anxiety/Worry
- Numbness
- Feeling Your Loved One's Presence

After the death of a loved one, some people never have any of these feelings, while others may find their feelings change moment to moment – for example, worry followed by anger or numbness followed by long periods of deep sadness. Often birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays are particularly difficult, as are some daily routines, like setting the table for one instead of two or sleeping alone after a partner dies.

Some people, overwhelmed with the intensity of their feelings of loss, are advised to consult a physician, who may suggest taking medications for a brief time to help make an overwhelming experience of grief manageable.

If you are having a hard time handling your emotions or if you have shut down in some way and feel numb much of the time, the best thing you can do is to ask for help. Professionals like grief counselors, social workers, and psychologists are trained to assist people who feel the same way you do. Suggestions on how to find an appropriate professional are listed in the resource section at the end of this handout.

## What Physical Reactions to Loss Might I Experience?

The grieving process can be physically exhausting. It can negatively affect your health, making it even harder for you to work through your grief. Usually the first year after suffering a loss is the most difficult, and many physical reactions may occur during that time. Tell your physician that you are grieving so that a proper exam and care can be given. Some common physical reactions to loss are the following:

- Fatigue/Exhaustion
- Shortness of Breath
- Sleep Disturbances
- Worsening of Illness and/or Development of New Conditions
- Over-Eating or Under-Eating
- Headaches
- Intestinal Upsets
- Loss of Energy
- Nausea
- Tearfulness/Crying

Eating properly, getting enough sleep, and exercising will also help during this difficult time. If you are unable to walk or get around easily, strength training and flexibility exercises can be done while sitting in a chair or a wheelchair.

## What Will My Grieving Process Be Like?

Grief is an individual experience. How the loss of a loved one affects you, how long you grieve, and how it feels to grieve usually depends on the following:

**Your emotional style.** Think about how you tend to express yourself. Do you regularly share feelings and emotions or do you tend to be more private? Are you socially active or do you prefer more solitary activities? How do you usually cope with unexpected problems? Expressing feelings and staying active can help make the grieving process more tolerable.

**Whom you have lost.** Was the loss a close family member, a childhood friend, a distant relative, a recent acquaintance? The closer your

relationship had been with the deceased, the longer and more intense the grieving process may be.

**How much your daily life is affected by the death.** Think about the amount and kind of contact you had with your loved one. How frequently did you see or talk with each other – everyday, once a week/month/year? Did you spend your time caring for your loved one or did he/she assist you with your daily activities? The more involved your loved one was in your life, the more difficult it may be to establish new routines.

**How the death occurred.** Reflect on the kind of death that occurred. Was the death sudden, such as a heart attack? Was it accidental, for example a car accident? Was it anticipated, such as a result of a prolonged chronic illness like cancer? Was it associated with a social stigma that is difficult to discuss publicly, like suicide or drug overdose? The circumstances surrounding the death can impact your feelings, physical reactions, and coping strategies.

## How Can I Manage Day to Day?

Grieving the loss of a loved one can be painful, making it difficult to get through each day. Here are some ways to help you cope each day and begin to feel better:

- Seek Out Caring People
- Talk About Your Loved One
- Share Your Feelings
- Cherish Your Memories
- Avoid Making Major Decisions
- Be Patient
- Join a Support Group
- Seek Professional Help
- Maintain a Daily Schedule
- Maintain a Normal Routine
- Eat Healthy Meals
- Exercise Regularly

In addition, keep clear records. This can be a confusing time. Write down the people you spoke with and what was said regarding insurance, health care, governmental assistance programs (Social Security, Veterans Administration), creditors, funeral homes, legal services, and banks. This will help you deal more effectively with all decisions you will have to make and help you resolve problems more quickly.

Most people first begin to feel better in small ways, slowly regaining interest in friendships, responsibilities, and surroundings. However, these relationships and routines will not diminish the unique connection you had with your loved one. You will carry your loved one in your heart and mind, always cherishing the qualities of that person that made him or her special. Your loved one is continually honored by being a part of who you are.

