

LOSS & GRIEF

Tips for Coping and Recovery



Part of the Division of Student Affairs

Loss is a universal human experience. It can involve change in relationships, health, location, or a belief system. Change can be intentional or unintentional, desirable or undesirable. Grief is the feeling associated with coming to terms with loss. The grief process involves dealing with emotions, letting go, and finding a way to move on with the rest of your life.

More about grief

Grief can be thought of as a journey through stages. Some stages are visited more than once; a journey may skip some stages. There is no single way to grieve. Everyone does it in her or his own way.

One stage may include a period of denial, shock, or numbness. This period can allow a person to carry on through duties like legal tasks, funerals, or important exams.

Anger, yearning, and denial of the permanence of the loss will also occur. It is a mistake to minimize feelings of loss or hurt.

There may also be a period of despair, and disorganization can follow. The reality of the loss sets in and underscores the meaning or value of the loss. Mourning is central to this time. Normal functioning may stop while the pain of grief is endured. A

time of reorganization or reentry will occur. Humor and enjoyment of things or relationships is recovered.

Remember that it takes a full year to experience holidays, special events, birthdays, or other important dates after a loss. The intensity of the grief will ebb and flow during this time. Grief lasting a year is not uncommon when someone you love dies.

Suggestions for coping with loss

- Participate in the appropriate, familiar social and cultural ritual when possible. A funeral may intensify feelings, but aids in closure. Some changes may require designing your own "ritual"—a divorce, for example, does not have a ritual ending (outside the legal system) in the American culture.
- Find and use support systems. Family members can help each other by talking with each other instead of holding painful feelings in. Talk. Cry. Remember.
- Sometimes family members are not available. Find a friend who can listen with empathy or find another person who has experienced a similar loss. Avoid isolation from other people.

- Acknowledge the meaning of the loss. Name and accept the feelings accompanying the loss. Sometimes using writing, art or music helps.
- Stay with a routine, even if it feels like just going through the motions.
- Be gentle, forgiving, and patient with yourself. It is all right to make mistakes or lose your concentration.
- Accept ups and downs. Some days will be better and some worse.
- Give yourself time. Time does heal, but how long it will take is an individual thing.
- Delay making major life decisions.
- Avoid using depressive chemicals (like alcohol) that numb your pain.

When to get professional help

People sometimes ask counselors for help if they do not have a support system or they are uncomfortable talking with family and friends. Being "stuck" in one stage of grief or being told a grief reaction is prolonged or severe may signal that counseling is appropriate. Some people develop

If you are a currently enrolled Texas A&M student, and would like to talk to someone further about grief and loss, contact the Student Counseling Service in Cain Hall (845-4427), or call the Help-Line (845-2700) evenings and weekends.

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prolonged physical symptoms—like stomach problems, difficulty sleeping, unusual fatigue, or loss of appetite—that signal a need for professional help. Doubts about yourself or the grieving process are also legitimate reasons to ask a counselor for reassurance.

Suggested Readings

These two books, available in paperback, have been found to be helpful for people who are grieving.

How to Survive the Loss of a Love (1991) by M. Colgrove, H. Bloomfield, & P. McWilliams. Pick it up and read the sections that apply to your situation. The book is readable, practical, and applies to a variety of losses in addition to death (Bestseller).

When Bad Things Happen to Good People (1981) by H. Kushner. Kushner wrote this book as an outgrowth of his recovery from the death of his son. He seeks to aid people in their spiritual search for the meaning of tragedy - Reprinted 2004 (Bestseller).