

Grief and Emotional Loss

This influenza pandemic is an unusual, difficult situation that is disrupting our daily lives and putting our ability to cope to a difficult test. We have to deal with the various changes it brings, which for some will include losses and even the death of loved ones.

What Are Grief and Emotional Loss?

The death of a loved one or the loss of something very precious is a fact of life that can be extremely difficult to deal with. People experience various types of difficult losses, including the loss of a family member, a job, a pet, health, safety, a dream, etc. Every significant loss leads to a stage of grief, a trial that the affected person must overcome.

The intensity and duration of the manifestations of grief or loss vary from one person to the next. There is no set timetable for resolving grief. In some cases, it can take just a few minutes for a person to go through the grieving process; in others, years. Our ability to face events and adapt to them differs based on our personality, life experiences, beliefs, values, support network, and other factors.

People who suffer a major loss show various reactions and pass through a grieving process (see The Grieving Process below). When a person dies, it is normal to feel shaken, to feel that your life has been turned upside down; you will need time to recover. It is not time that heals all wounds, but what happens during that time. You must give yourself the tools to overcome the trial, including understanding what is happening and various ways of promoting the resolution of grief.



Signs of Grief and Emotional Loss

People going through grief or emotional loss may:

- refuse to believe that the person is really dead;
- be angry, with uncontrollable mood swings;
- feel intense loneliness, an inner emptiness, a sense of being torn apart or abandoned, resentment of an unjust, undeserved loss;
- feel guilty or powerless;
- feel like they are losing control of their emotions;
- be confused or disoriented or have memory lapses such as forgetting appointments;
- feel sadness, pain, or despair;
- feel like they are running on autopilot;
- feel stress and anxiety about the new reality of their lives. For example, fear of the unknown, of lacking money, of raising their children alone, of being unable to love again, etc.;
- experience changes to their sleep habits and appetite;
- feel agitation, palpitations, a lack of air, tightness in the chest, lump in the throat, vertigo, etc.

The Stages of Grief

All bereaved people go through a grief process made up of several steps. The steps of grief are normal and even essential to human equilibrium, and every person experiences them differently. Grief is not an illness, but like a physical wound it requires care and time.

Grief can be divided into three phases:

Phase 1

SHOCK AND DENIAL

This is a phase of imbalance that can last a matter of minutes, days, or weeks. People in this stage are in a state of shock, unable to believe in the reality and accept it. They are "paralyzed" and unable to react; they feel like they are groping in the darkness and feel numb or shrivelled, and may weep and feel nostalgic and irritable.

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Phase 2

DISORGANIZATION

This phase may last weeks or months. It can bring waves of physical distress (with varied symptoms), anger, incomprehension, a feeling of injustice, mild or intense feelings of guilt, worries of every kind, or unusual behaviour. The bereaved person may feel tense, agitated, unmotivated, and purposeless, and may identify with the deceased. This phase is one of sharp anguish and sadness.

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Phase 3

REORGANIZATION OR RESOLUTION OF GRIEF

In this phase, the bereaved recover their balance. It may take months or years. The worst of the pain is passed and the bereaved recover their usual roles with competence. They start to make plans for the future and may play new roles; they recover the ability to take pleasure and seek the presence or confidence of one or more other people. This is in a sense a period of convalescence and healing in which the bereaved person finds a way to accept his or her new situation.

These phases and reactions are completely normal human reactions to grief.

Ways to Improve the Situation

There are many things you can do to help get through this difficult time.

- Balance the time you spend alone and with others according to your needs. Do not hesitate to ask for help, since those close to you will not always be able to tell what you need.
- Remind yourself that your grief subsiding does not mean that you are forgetting the person you lost. You can feel better while still remembering them. You are not betraying the person just because your pain is easing.
- Avoid excessive consumption of drugs, alcohol, or medication. This hampers you in accepting the loss and can worsen the situation.
- Recognize and accept that life has changed. You may need to alter your daily routine.
- Pay attention to your feelings, emotions, and reactions, and give yourself permission to express them to someone you trust or by writing or reading.
- Have a small personal ceremony to say goodbye to the person in your own way.
- Deal with the grief or loss at your own pace.
- Resume your normal activities and recreation when you feel able to do so despite the pain. Even if you don't always feel like it, resuming your normal activities can help you.
- Rediscover some activities that you did before you knew the person you've lost, or try something new.
- Adopt a healthy lifestyle, with a proper diet and enough sleep and relaxation.
- Identify one or more people you can count on when you need them, for example to take care of your children.
- Ask your family for help and offer them yours. Depend on one another. Let yourselves talk with one another about your loss or bereavement.
- Remember strategies you've used in the past to get through difficult times.
- Count on your personal strengths.

Finding a new equilibrium will take patience, energy, and perseverance.

Things Are Getting Better When...

You are gradually moving towards resolving your grief or loss if:

- You are starting to be able to picture life without the other person.
- You are thinking of the person you lost a little less often.
- You are gradually resuming your daily activities.
- You are starting to smile and enjoy yourself again.
- You are sleeping and eating properly.
- You are once again setting goals and making plans, such as resuming your studies, signing up for an activity, planning a trip, etc.

If you want to help a grieving loved one, just offer your time, your support, and your understanding. The simple, sincere gestures are the most comforting.

When to Seek Help

It's possible that your pain may persist even though you feel that you have tried everything. These are some signs that your state is getting worse:

- Intense, prolonged suffering, or on the contrary, absence of any distress as though nothing had happened
- Difficulty concentrating, confusion
- Disrupted functioning, such as isolating yourself, rejecting those close to you, or neglecting your basic needs such as eating or personal hygiene
- Sleep disturbances such as repeated nightmares, insomnia, or excessive sleeping
- Violent ideas or behaviour
- Increased consumption of alcohol, drugs, or medication
- Suicidal ideas

If you are having these signs, it is urgent that you seek help from a health and social services professional.

Available Resources

Telephone

- Your local health and social services centre
- Info-Santé: 8-1-1
- Services Québec toll-free line: 1-877-644-4545
- Tel-jeunes: 1-800-263-2266
- Ligne Parents: 1-800-361-5085
- Canadian Mental Health Association, Québec Chapter: 514-849-3291

Internet

- Government of Québec pandemic website: www.pandemiequebec.gouv.qc.ca
- Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux du Québec: www.msss.gouv.qc.ca
- Canadian Mental Health Association, Québec Chapter: www.acsm-ca.qc.ca/questionnaires
- Tel-jeunes: www.teljeunes.com

Read the other psychosocial information sheets dealing with various topics related to influenza pandemics. They can be downloaded from the Government of Québec's pandemic website.

Collaboration

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Ordre des psychologues du Québec

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Checklist

If necessary, contact:
