

Living with Grief

By Kimberly Moner, R.N.

An acquaintance is walking toward you. You ask, “How are you feeling?” but do not really want to know the answer. When was the last time you looked inside yourself and asked, “How am I feeling?”

Experiencing the death of both of my parents in a four month period pushed me into a “dark” place that made me feel hopeless and helpless. My mother passed suddenly, with no previous hints that anything was wrong with her health. I was left to help care for my father, which left little time to grieve for my mother. My father became ill and needed almost constant care for the next four months. When he died four months later, I felt alone, with no one to share the burden of planning another funeral and making decisions on what to do with their estate. In addition, I had just started a new job that took up much of my time in getting acclimated to life in the world of higher education. I was in a dark place. While I was fortunate to have support from family and friends, I still was becoming depressed because of all of the decisions that only I could make. I could ask for advice, but the final decision, right or wrong, was mine.

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-KIMBERLY MONER, R.N.

As a psychiatric nurse, I thought I would be able to manage my grief. I had experience working with people who were grieving, but I still became depressed. In my mind, reaching out for help would have been a sign of weakness and an indication of my inability to heal myself. At that time, I was experiencing many personal changes including the death of my dog, a broken engagement with a long-time beau, and the start of a new job. All of these events added to the grief I was feeling over the loss of my parents.



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Grief is a phenomenon that occurs after a major loss. Grief is an emotion that can be strong and at times overwhelming regardless of the source of the grief (e.g., death of a loved one, divorce, loss of a family pet). Working through grief can be helpful in coming to terms with the loss. Most psychology books discuss seven stages: (a) disbelief or shock; (b) denial; (c) guilt and pain; (d) bargaining, (e) anger; (f) depression; and (g) acceptance. These stages may not be sequential, may regress after completing a stage, and may stagnate at another stage. Talking to an expert can help to understand these stages, but ultimately, the person experiencing grief must deal with these stages within themselves.

Grieving can be a lifelong process, with some days being better than others. As human beings, we learn to bury our feelings, which can lead to both psychological and physiological stressors, such as depression, over-eating, substance misuse, etc. At this time, the help of a professional (e.g., psychiatric nurse practitioner, psychologist, counselor, etc.) can be a source of support during the grieving process.

As I worked through my grief, and I am still grieving, I have come to the awareness that I will remember my parents and their love and guidance for the rest of my life. I will learn not to be sad because of their absence, but happy because of my precious memories and



experiences throughout the years. Although a person may not be physically present, their presence is viable in everyday things we see and do. For example, a certain flower may remind us of my mother's flower garden, a meal may call to mind a family reunion or gathering on a holiday, and a song may bring the memory of attending church with a loved one.

Grief can come in all shapes and sizes and is not limited to just the death of a loved one. Grief can come from a sudden loss, such as a job or a friendship. Acknowledging the loss and being aware of the stages of grief can help the healing process. Do not be afraid to share your grief with another person; maintain a healthy diet, sleep and rest, and exercise; and continue to live life, dance and smile.