

Grieving an Unexpected Loss

The unexpected loss of a loved one is often shocking and painful. The grief that ensues can be intense, complex and long term. Grief does not follow a linear path and does not always move in a forward direction. There is no time frame for grief. Grief work is an extremely individual and unique process; each person will experience it in his/her own way and at his/her own pace. However, many bereaved persons share common feelings and reactions including:

Shock	Denial	Pain
Guilt	Anger	Shame
Despair	Disbelief	Hopelessness
Stress	Sadness	Numbness
Rejection	Loneliness	Abandonment
Confusion	Self-blame	Anxiety
Helplessness	Depression	

These feelings are normal reactions and the expression of them is a natural part of grieving.

There are particular challenges facing college students who are grieving. For some students, they are experiencing a first encounter with loss or death. Thus, they may not know what to expect or how to cope with what they are feeling. A death on campus can trigger feelings of vulnerability or heightened awareness of mortality in other students. A death occurring in a traumatic manner may be particularly stressful. Also, the academic and social demands of college life quickly resume and can feel overwhelming to the student who is still struggling with the emotional challenges of grieving.

Suggestions for how a student can help themselves:

- Gather information. Develop an understanding of the grieving process. Talk with members of bereavement support organizations and/or clergy. Use bibliographic resources to learn more.
- Participate in rituals/say goodbye. Ceremonies and rituals help us to make the "unreal" more real and to move toward accepting and integrating our loss. Attend the funeral or memorial service. Mark important anniversaries in ways that are meaningful to you.
- Care for yourself physically. Get adequate rest, nutrition and exercise.
- Care for yourself emotionally. Give yourself permission to grieve. Allow quiet time alone to reflect and to explore and experience your thoughts and feelings. Allow time to heal without setting unrealistic goals and deadlines. Resist/delay making major decisions/changes in your life.
- Express your feelings. Allow opportunities to express the full range of your emotions. This includes sadness, but also perhaps, fear, guilt, anger, resentment, and relief. Avoiding emotions through excessive activity, denial, or abuse of substances complicates and prolongs the pain of loss.
- Seek support. Gathering and using social support is essential. Support from others reduces isolation and loneliness and increases one's sense of security, safety and attachment. Talk to friends openly about your loss. If religion or spirituality is important to you, talk with a member of the clergy or a spiritual advisor. Consider joining a support group for people who have experienced a similar loss.
- Consider seeking professional help. The Counseling Service is available for counseling support and offers a 24/7 counselor on call who can be contacted by 845-437-7333. The CARE office can assist with off campus referrals.

How you can help a student

- Talk openly to the bereaved person about their loss and feelings. Don't try to offer false cheer or minimize the loss.
- Be available. Your presence and companionship are important.
- Listen/be patient. Listening is an often overlooked gift. Allow the bereaved person to vent feelings. Don't judge the person's thoughts or feelings. Don't feel you need to offer advice. Listening itself is very powerful.
- Encourage self care. Encourage the student to care of themself physically, emotionally, and socially. Encourage the student to seek support and/or professional help, if appropriate.
- Accept your own limitations. Accept that you cannot eliminate the pain the student is experiencing.

Grief is a natural, expected response to loss and each person must work through it in their own way and at their own pace. Be supportive, but care for yourself too.

Adapted from the University of Mary Washington, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Iowa websites