

COPING WITH LOSS

When most people think of coping with loss, they think of death. There are many types of losses we experience in life. Loss can be the death of a parent, spouse, child, pet, or friend. It can be due to divorce or the break up of a relationship. Changes, such as a child going to college or marrying, moving to a new neighborhood, leaving a job, or graduating, can lead to feelings of loss. Inability to have children, managing children with problems, changes in financial status, retiring, and breaking a prized possession may be experienced as losses. Losses cannot be prevented, as they are an expected part of living.

Changes can be final, transitional, and others are temporary. Death is a final loss. Divorce and a change in financial status are transitions. A child being away is a temporary loss. Some losses may be due to choice, such as a divorce, while others are out of our control. A series of small losses may accumulate and have the same impact as a major loss.

The emotional impact of certain losses may be greater on women due to the high value they place on relationships. Culturally women tends to focus on relationships, while men focus on careers and financial concerns. Though this is changing, women still value their relationships.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has outlined five stages of grief. The first is denial, where we do not believe it. Not me? The next stage is anger. Why me? It can include rage and envy. Thirdly, we want to bargain with God, the physician or whoever. Next we go into depression. We mourn the loss. Finally, there is acceptance. We start to move on and rebuild. You can recycle through the stages at deeper levels and move on again.

Nancy O'Conner indicates there are four stages to working on recovery. The first stage lasts from 1 to 8 weeks and focuses on breaking old habits. For example, you stop going to feed your dog, who has died. The second stage lasts 8 weeks to one year. We begin to construct a new life. This lasts through the four seasons and all the holidays as we adjust to how the loss has affected these. The third stage lasts one to 2 years as new friends and experiences are found. The final stage lasts up to 5 years, while our readjustment is completed.

Things to consider when experiencing a loss include how serious was the loss. Was the person or situation integral to our daily life? The death or move of a person we live with is usually more serious than some one we do not live with. What was the emotional impact? How close was the person or important the situation? One neighbor moving away is different than you moving out of your neighborhood.

There are maladaptive and creative ways to cope with loss. Maladaptive coping includes taking care of others rather than yourself. Avoiding and ignoring the loss does not help. Doing anything to excess; such as sleeping, not sleeping, eating, not eating, withdrawing, is not healthy.

Adaptive and positive ways to cope include setting priorities and limiting responsibilities. Talking and being with people generally helps. Some people find that writing or journaling provides relief. Letters to God, the physician or whoever, not to be sent, can ease your anger during that stage of grieving. Self help groups are available for more common experiences. Parents Without Partners, Compassionate Friends and Hospice all have support groups. Take care of yourself by eating well, exercising and getting enough sleep. Creative activities, such as drawing, painting, handicrafts, music, and gardening, can ease the loss. Talking to friends can also be helpful.

A loss need not lead to life long pain. Going through the stages of grief and learning to cope lead to healing and hope in the future. Feeling pain and grief is normal. Time, effort, support and friendship allow us to move forward.

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