



With compassion and deep insight, Dr. Bill Webster explains the ten things you should know about grief and finding your process for healing.

TEN FACTS about Grief and Grieving

Adapted from the original by Dr. Bill Webster

Grief can be a such a difficult challenge because we never really know what to expect. Let's change that, starting with some crucial truths about grief and grieving, and how we can work through the process to find healing.

1. Grief is normal.

Grief is the normal, human response to a significant loss. People may encourage you to “be strong” or “not to cry.” But how sad would it be if someone we cared about died and we carried on as if nothing had happened.

I'd like to think that someone will miss me enough to shed a tear after I'm gone. When you lose someone special from your life you are going to grieve. Our grief says that we miss the person and that we're struggling to adjust to a life without that special relationship. Saying that grief is normal doesn't minimize its difficulty. It may be one of the most challenging experiences of your life. You are not crazy, nor weak, nor “not handling things.” You are simply experiencing grief—a normal response.

2. The worst kind of grief is yours.

Loss is a very personal matter. It can feel like the worst possible thing has happened to you. While circumstances vary, the only loss that matters now is yours. When you lose a significant person from your life, whatever the relationship, it hurts. Nothing takes away from your right to feel the loss and grief the absence of that person from your life.

3. The way out of grief is through it.

Grief is painful. Loss is one of the most difficult human experiences. We may try to avoid the pain or attempt to get over it as quickly as possible. Most often, it simply doesn't work that way. Helen Keller said “The only way to get to the other side is to go through the door.” We need the courage to go through this experience of grief—this is a major key to recovery.

4. Your grief is intimately connected to the relationship.

Every relationship has unique significance. To fully understand our grief we need to understand what the relationship brought to our life and the impact of that loss. We may grieve a parent differently from the loss of a friend. Each made a different contribution to our lives and so we grieve differently. Two individuals, both experiencing the loss of a spouse, may grieve quite differently due to different circumstances of the relationship.



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5. Grief is hard work.

A grief response often takes a toll on us physically and emotionally. This is why we often feel so fatigued after a loss or why we may feel apathetic towards people and events. The problem can be compounded by people's expectations of us to be strong and get on with life.

6. Your grief will take longer than most people think.

How long will grief last? It is finished when it is finished. The first few months may be particularly intense, while the first year is difficult as holidays, anniversaries and birthdays remind us of our loss. We must anticipate these difficult days, know they are normal and be compassionate with ourselves. Some describe the second year of grief as the lonely year when the realization of the life without the deceased becomes even more of a reality. Take your time. As John Donne said, "He who has no time to mourn, has no time to mend." Grief always takes longer than people expect.

7. Grief is unpredictable.

Grief elicits a wide variety of feelings and reactions beyond sadness, crying, depression and other "expected" manifestations. Your responses may seem quite uncharacteristic. "This isn't like me," you may think. Grief is unpredictable and when you think you have it figured out, you often don't. In an unexpected moment, you'll find yourself missing the person again. Unpredictability is the only predictable thing about grief.

8. Beware of "secondary losses."

The death of any individual, so difficult in itself, may also precipitate many other changes in your life. For some it may mean the loss of financial security, a home or even their independence. Others face the loss of a role, such as parents whose child dies. Yet others may lose their dreams of enjoying retirement together, or having dad walk us down the aisle. Each loss has its own impact and each will need to be mourned.

9. Grief comes and goes.

A sore throat is painful for a few days, then the pain gradually disappears. That's not how grief works. Sometimes, at first, we do not fully feel the pain of grief because we are in shock and numb. Often the pain becomes more intense some months after the event. Even then, grief is not unlike a roller coaster. One day we feel pretty good, the next we're in despair. Just when we think we are getting over it we may experience another devastating setback. This can be discouraging to those who do not recognize what is happening. We need to realize that this is the way grief works itself out and trust that the process, difficult as it is, is helping us work towards reconciliation.

*Grieving people
need to talk.*

10. Effective grief work is not done alone.

Society has unrealistic expectations about mourning, expecting us to get over it quickly and expressing these expectations in a way that seems less than sensitive. People mean well, but they are not being helpful. Some believe that grief is so personal we want to keep it to ourselves. Or they may feel uncomfortable with our grief and so, shortly after the funeral is over, the person or the loss is not mentioned. People are afraid to say or do the wrong thing so they say and do nothing. It can feel like a conspiracy of silence.

Grieving people need to talk. In fairness, not everyone will be willing or even able to respond to you. Accept that and try to find a support group or a counselor who can help. Or someone who has been through a similar experience. I believe in the power of shared experiences, and often others who have been through the deep places can be a real help. Processing grief is about coping with the loss of a relationship. Through finding other helping and supportive relationships, relief can be found. ■



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