

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Understanding and Coping with a Loss

Grief and mourning are words we use to talk about a group of feelings associated with loss—whether it's the death of a loved one or the end of a relationship. Although people may describe the emotions they're feeling in different ways, most of us experience similar feelings when faced with a significant loss.

The Phases of Grief

Though different for each person, there are some commonalities in the mourning process. The five phases of grief that most people experience are:

1. Shock
2. Denial
3. Bargaining and self-blaming
4. Anger and anxiety
5. Acceptance

When death is a result of a traumatic accident or disaster, complex issues can arise. When this is the case, the grief process can be different from an expected or anticipated death. For example, details of the accident or the disaster may dominate the person's mind, which can become a diversion from grieving for the deceased person. Or the bereaved person may suffer from "survivor guilt", questioning why they survived when others have died.

All of the feelings we experience during the grieving process have to do with accepting the reality of a significant loss and saying good-bye.

Here are a few things that may help you deal with a loss:

Vent your feelings. Make plans with a good friend to get together once a week for a month. Ask your friend if he or she will listen while you talk about your loss. If you need to talk more than once a week, make arrangements with two friends—perhaps, one for Monday and the other for Thursday. Make sure that your friends realize that you're not seeking advice. Tell them that by being there and just listening is supporting you. Perhaps you will want to continue this plan to talk after a month, or move back into more spontaneous get-togethers.

Join a group. People usually find it helpful to be with others who are going through a similar loss. There are a variety of organizations and self-help groups available.

Learn something about grief. Some of the feelings that are experienced during a loss can be frightening. Often, feelings are less frightening when we realize that they are a common reaction to loss. It may be helpful to read books on the subject or discuss grief with a counselor or your family doctor. This will help you to recognize which feelings are normal, and when it may be time to get help to work through your feelings.

Identify what coping strategies have worked before. If writing about your loss in a journal or talking about it with friends helped when you lost your job, the same thing may help when you are coping with the loss of a loved one.

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Think about helping others. Sometimes getting involved in other people's lives can help us redefine our loss. For example, families having lost a loved one in an accident involving a drunk driver have found comfort working with groups that attempt to reduce the incidence of such accidents for other families. When the loss of a loved one is due to a particular illness, many people have found comfort in volunteering for foundations that support care, treatment or research of the disease.

Take care of your health. Coping with our feelings is always a little easier when we are in good physical health. Try to get adequate rest and eat a balanced diet.

Coping with a significant loss is a difficult thing. While every person and every situation is unique, learning from the experiences of others, and sharing your pain or confusion can be helpful in overcoming feelings of hurt, anger or grief.