

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

Managing Grief: Understanding Emotions Around Trying Situations

Unfortunately loss is a part of life. Whether it’s an unexpected death, a devastating diagnosis or another crushing blow, trying situations test us all. The way we experience grief and cope with a loss is different from person to person. But regardless of the response, a loss can make even the most resilient of people feel like their world is spiralling out of control.

Although there is no quick fix to help you recover and bounce back, there are ways to deal with the impact of a challenging life event to help you come to terms with your new reality:

Take the time. After a significant loss, many people set unrealistic expectations of when they should return to "normal." Respect the need for personal healing time; realize that this is not a step-by-step process and that there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Take things one day at a time and slowly transition back into your daily routine.

Find support. At first, you may find it easier to retreat and hide than to lean on others. Instead, reach out to friends and family. Ask for help organizing the details of a funeral or recruit a friend to babysit so you have time to collect your thoughts. Friends and family are usually eager to help but struggle with what to do and when, so don’t be shy to ask. Also consider joining a support group to connect with other people who have dealt with similar situations.

Seek help. If your grief has become overwhelming consider connecting with a counselor or other mental health professional. Signs that it’s time for professional support include: prolonged eating or sleeping problems, trouble completing daily activities, severe anxiety, depression or feelings of worthlessness. While it can seem daunting to reach out to a “stranger,” an outside, impartial person can provide the sounding board and insights you need to move beyond the pain and get on with your life.

Care for yourself. Be sure to take some time to focus on yourself and try to meet your own needs. During a crisis it can feel wrong to indulge, but it can actually be a helpful tool that can help you relax and release all that pent up tension. Take some time out for yourself by getting a massage, visiting the spa or even taking a relaxing hot bath.

Lean on friends. Make time to spend with close friends who can be that ear you need to vent your grief, fear and anxiety caused by your distressing news. Your shared experiences with good friends can also have a way of making you smile or laugh, even on the darkest of days.

Take care. Coping with grief can take a serious physical toll. Look after your body by getting lots of rest, eating a healthy diet and staying active. If your body feels good, your mind will follow.

Write it down. After a loss it can be difficult to pinpoint exactly what you’re feeling. You may experience several feelings at the same time and others that contradict each other. Writing down your thoughts may help you express yourself and come to terms with what you are going through. Try to write exactly what’s on your mind without editing or screening yourself.

Helping Your Kids Cope

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It is a real challenge to grapple with your own emotions while trying to comfort children and understand their concerns. This is especially important after the loss of a loved one. Children go through a grieving process, but often express it differently than adults.

Just like adults, kids need to feel pain, mourn and grow. Your child may be expressing feelings of loss and grief if you start to notice:

- stomach aches or headaches
- sleeping problems and nightmares
- appetite issues
- problems at school
- irritability, anger or aggression
- temper tantrums
- clinginess
- regressing to younger behavior or trying to act older

If you're worried about how your child is coping, get support from a professional who can help you work with your child to understand and accept his or her own feelings and find better ways to cope.

What You Can Do

How you help your children work through this loss will depend on their age and life stage. It is also impacted by their development, background and past experiences with grief. Generally, you should try to:

Be open. Many parents make the mistake of trying to protect kids by leaving them in the dark. This may stop them from dealing with the loss and can cause problems down the road. Children need to know what's happening, even if they don't ask—just make sure the information you share is age-appropriate. Find out what they think and feel about the situation, listen carefully to what they have to say and answer any questions they may have openly and honestly.

Be a role model. Share your own grief with your kids and let them know that it's ok to be sad or scared. If you are open with your feelings, they will be more open with you. At the same time, try to remain in control so they feel safe and supported.

Help them relate. Children's stories, television shows and movies can touch on themes related to your situation. Although you should never rely on these methods alone, they can be a great way to encourage conversation. Also attending a memorial service if a loved one has passed away, or pointing out families who have gone through similar situations, will help your children understand and come to terms with their own loss.

Stick to a routine. For kids especially, major changes to routine and schedules can breed uncertainty and anxiety. Try to keep the family's regular living habits as normal as you can, even while coping with the challenges of grief.

Growing up is an ongoing process of change. The support children receive in crisis situations is pivotal and can be a defining moment in their lives. One that, if handled appropriately, can help them better cope with life's inevitable changes—both good and bad.

Moving Forward

Grief and loss caused by the death of a loved one, illness or another devastating situation can have a huge impact on your mental and physical well-being and even redefine your entire identity. Your personal experience with grief is unique and so is how you choose to cope. Some of the suggestions in this article will work better than others for you, so do what feels right for you and your family. While it may sound cliché, time is really the best remedy for overcoming grief and healing the wounds it creates.

While it will definitely take time, energy and personal struggle, coming to terms with your emotions is possible.