

Learning to Cope with Loss

Grief is a very personal thing. After Monday's incident at Virginia Tech, some may cry while others express anger at the gunman and situation. It's important to accept grief as a natural part of the healing process and progress through the steps at your own pace.

Stages of Grief

Many people experience the following stages during the grieving process. Not everyone will go through every stage, however.

- **Denial and Shock**—When a loved one dies or when someone is facing his own death, the initial reaction might be denial. As the grieving person begins to talk about a death and the feelings associated with it, the shocking loss becomes real and hits hard. It is natural to want to escape this reality, and so denial sets in.
- **Anger**—Once the reality of the loss sinks in, the grieving person may get angry at the seeming unfairness of life. "Why should I suffer?" he wonders. As he receives support from friends and family members, the grieving person will become less angry and will hopefully move onto the next stage of grief.
- **Bargaining**—Some people may attempt to bargain with a higher power for return of the lost loved one or for the return of one's health.
- **Guilt**—Many times, the person who is left behind feels guilty about things that went unsaid or undone, especially if the death is sudden and unexpected. It is important in this stage for the person to forgive himself and accept the reality that is left. When this is achieved, he can move on.
- **Depression**—Obviously, the death of a loved one creates a great sense of loss. Some will experience mood fluctuations and may feel isolated or lonely for a long time. It is important to allow the grief-stricken enough time to work through this stage. The loss of a loved one is tragic and devastating, and it takes most people some time to get over this sorrow.

- **Loneliness**—Some people will experience loneliness as their lives change because of the loss. The survivor must find ways to fill the hole, whether through new relationships or new hobbies and interests. As the grief-stricken person reaches out to others, he will be able to work successfully through this important stage.
- **Acceptance**—At this stage, those experiencing the loss accept and deal with the death. This does not mean that the person is happy and has forgotten all about the deceased, but just that he has been able to accept the loss as a final reality.
- **Hope**—Finally, those who have lost someone will again experience the hope of the future. They will look ahead to brighter and better times, or at least to a peaceful acceptance of their circumstances and a sense of getting on with life.

This is one of those times when all you've learned about listening will come in handy. Simply listen and provide a "shoulder to cry on." Be supportive and talk openly about the situation, if the student so desires. When grief hits one of your students, let him lead the way in how he will handle the emotional journey. If he doesn't want to discuss the situation, allow him to remain silent and find his own way of dealing with the loss. If you feel the person is experiencing severe depression and is not coping with daily responsibilities, however, be sure to aid him in getting professional help.

And remember this: grief is an extremely difficult thing to get through or to help someone else get through regardless of your level of experience. If you, at any time, feel overwhelmed by your own grief or the grief a student is experiencing, seek help. It's extremely important for "caretakers" to take care of themselves as well.

Sources: "Trauma, Loss & Bereavement" by Gary W. Reece, Ph.D. , www.counselingforloss.com; "The Grieving Process," from the Counseling Center at University at Buffalo-State University of New York, <http://ub-counseling.buffalo.edu/process.shtml>; "Grief Tips" by Jim Miller, www.willowgreen.com

a bonus item from