

AN INTRODUCTION TO GRIEVING



By Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, MDiv

An Introduction to Grieving

By Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, MDiv

Whenever we face loss, we experience grief. Our reactions are unique and individual; none of us experiences grief in the same way.

Not only are *we* different, our *losses* are different. Some may grieve a spouse, others a child, parent, brother, sister, or friend. Each of these relationships is unique; some may have been close, others may have had more tension or conflict. Circumstances may differ. Some losses are sudden, while others follow a prolonged illness. And we may each be able to draw upon different levels of support.

As we experience loss, we may need to remind ourselves of these basic facts. Sometimes we torture ourselves wondering why we do not respond as others do, even members of our own family. But each of us is different.

We may feel anger: at God; towards the person who died; perhaps towards someone who we feel is not responding the way we'd like him or her to respond. We may feel guilt, too. Could we have done something differently or done more? We may even feel responsible for the loss.

Other emotions are common. Feelings of sadness, longing for the person's presence, jealousy of others who have not experienced our loss, even relief that a prolonged illness has ended, may trouble us. But they are normal and natural responses to grief. Grief may affect us in other ways. In some, the experience of grief may be physical: aches and pains, difficulty eating or sleeping, fatigue. We may constantly think of the person, even replaying in our mind some final episode or experience. Grief can affect our spiritual selves. We may struggle to find meaning in our loss; our relationship with God may change.

I often describe grief as a roller coaster. It is full of ups and downs, highs and lows, times that we may think we are doing better and times that we may think we are sure we are not. The metaphor reminds us that our sense of progress may feel very uneven.

But there are things we can do to help ourselves as we experience grief. First, it is important to accept the fact that we are grieving; take time to grieve, to realize that life will be different, and sometimes difficult. We need to be gentle with ourselves.

Second, we can learn from the ways we have handled loss before. We need to draw on our resources-the coping skills we have, our own sources of support, and our spiritual strengths. And from earlier experiences, we can learn the mistakes we need to avoid.

We do not have to struggle alone. We can share our grief with family and friends. We can seek help from clergy or counselors. Hospices and funeral homes may be able to suggest support groups. And librarians and bookstores can recommend books that can assist us as we grieve.

(From the "Newly Bereaved" issue of HFA's bereavement newsletter, Journeys)
Hospice Foundation of America