

Change, Grief, and Healing

Sandra K. Tunajek CRNA, DNP
CPIA Consultant

Throughout our lives, each of us will encounter changes—good or bad—that create stress that strains our coping skills and adaptive resources.

Any time something significant is changed or taken away from us, we grieve. The grieving process can trigger a host of unfamiliar, painful, intense, confusing emotions and behaviors that can unravel our sense of control, safety, and security.¹

Although we associate grief with death, any significant loss or change, and every move, every job, marriage, divorce, illness, retirement—even periods of personal growth—may cause feelings of sadness and grief.

Grief is the normal response to an event that is significant enough to require the brain to adjust our “normal” perceptions. Anger, sadness, fear, and contentment jumble together, suddenly shifting and sometimes precariously out-of-control.

Anger is usually the first emotion to appear after a loss. Anger mobilizes psychological resources for action, and it is an important and necessary step in the grieving process. Grieving requires energy. Anger supplies the extra push you need to regain your balance after a loss.

Sadness may appear with anger. It is intense and comes in waves whenever we recall our loss. Remember that it is okay to cry. Crying is not a weakness; it's a natural, built-in, human response to sorrow, pain, fear, anger, shame, grief, despair, and sadness. If you choose to care about anything, you will experience loss, you will grieve, and you will cry. Crying makes you feel better and can help to prevent chronic depression.

According to Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, the grieving process has several predictable stages including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. She also suggests that grief is not stable, but is an active and transformative process. Responses to loss are individual, not a rigid framework.² Grieving individuals may experience fatigue, insomnia, pain, gastrointestinal symptoms, chest palpitations, panic attacks, increased anxiety, helplessness, or a generalized feeling of not being quite right.

Certainly, a sudden, accidental, unexpected, or traumatic loss shatters the world as we know it. The finality of any loss, coupled with uncertainty, results in feelings of vulnerability. Our feelings of vulnerability make us search for someone or something to blame, and we may fear the future. There is an increased awareness of one's own mortality and questions about being able to survive without the person or situation lost. An inability to concentrate, anger, and emotional and physical fatigue all serve to heighten anxiety, vulnerability, panic, and fear. Disbelief and a complicated range of emotions as well as shock, numbness, and helplessness are very common.²⁻⁴

Losing a Colleague to Suicide

The death of a coworker can be devastating and affect your feelings about work, your own life, and your fears about death and dying. Full-time workers spend almost as much time with their associates as they do with their families and friends. In fact, over time, these people may become external family members.⁵ When a coworker commits suicide, people often feel angry with the person who committed suicide, feeling frustrated about not knowing why.

A death that appears to involve an element of choice raises painful questions and feelings of guilt. You may feel guilty about things done or left undone, unresolved quarrels, words said or left unsaid, or something that was neglected. There is self-reproach, the unanswered question of “how did I miss it?” and often a strong urge to make sure this kind of death does not happen to others. Colleagues must also address the shadow of stigma, which can be the greatest hindrance to healing. Suicide is the worst possible outcome of mental health or behavioral health problems, not a moral weakness or character flaw.⁶

Handling Grief and Loss

Working through the stages of grief can eventually lead to recovery, resolution, and resilience. There is no fixed time in which you should expect to feel better. This time needed depends on many things, such as the type of attachment to the person, how much time was spent anticipating the loss, and if the loss was sudden or traumatic. Counseling experts agree that it takes two full years to grieve a major loss.¹⁻⁶

Unhealthy, prolonged grieving can affect physical and mental well-being.⁷ Make an effort to take good care of yourself. Eat good meals, exercise regularly, drink plenty of water, and get lots of rest. And it is also okay to have days when you simply indulge in your sadness and become immersed in the pain. You must be gentle with yourself.

Our society is uncomfortable with grief. We don't make time for grief, and we tend to lose patience with those who mourn. Unfortunately, healthcare providers especially have little time to grieve. We may get three days leave, and then it is back to work, back to normal. We live in a culture that tells us “you can get through it” or “time to move on.” When we are bombarded with the expectations of being “back to normal,” we may shut down and become mired in our grief. For healthcare workers, feelings of helplessness, anger, loss of confidence, burnout, and work overload may contribute to patient safety concerns as well as the physical and mental health of the provider.⁷

Building Resilience

A growing body of evidence documents the importance of resilience in the face of highly adverse events.⁸ Resilience is described as having the skills and attributes to rebound from a mental, physical, and emotional crisis.

To find meaning in loss, one must confront reality and deal with

painful thoughts and feelings about the experience. Numerous bereavement investigators have maintained that finding meaning in the midst of a loss is a core component of the grieving process.^{1-4, 7}

Fear, anger, anxiety, distress, helplessness, and hopelessness decrease your ability to solve your problems and weaken your resiliency. Constant fears and worries weaken your immune system and increase your vulnerability to illness.⁷

How do people deal with sudden loss and other difficult events that change their lives? Perhaps the most important attribute that resilient individuals possess is their capacity to tolerate uncertainty and change. Highly resilient individuals also have the ability to cope with and manage their stress levels, and to remain emotionally connected to themselves and others.¹⁻⁴ Dr. Kubler-Ross concluded that the small losses of our lives teach us the coping skills we need when faced with large losses.²

An important factor in healing from loss is support from others. Even if you are usually uncomfortable talking about your feelings, talk about them when you're grieving. Knowing that others understand what you're going through will help you heal. Let people who care about you take care of you, even if you take pride in being strong and self-sufficient.

Hope and Healing

Some losses never entirely fade. Successful adaptation does not mean you become "your old self" again or that you will forget the loss. However, in time you will integrate the loss into your life and adjust to a new life that moves forward and begins anew.

Grief arises because we are not alone. The sense of connection to others and to the world is what breaks our hearts. Our vulnerability to grief, our feelings of anger, all the unmanageable emotions, remind us of our necessary interdependence and reinforces the cost of loving and caring. Grieving helps us adjust emotionally to a painful change in our lives. Regardless of the change, be it real, perceived, or anticipated, a person's life is never quite the same.

Many of us resolve to live differently, to see old friends, to be more forgiving of our children and in our relationships. Some will seek new adventures, others a more contemplative lifestyle. Estate planning and wills may finally get done. Survivors of sudden loss may seek meaning through taking action and advocating for awareness and change, to promote a worthy cause.

Healing means "to make whole." We are each born with the innate capacity to form minor to major emotional attachments or bonds to people, places, rituals, ideas, and other things that we come across during our life journey. When faced with adverse situations, our minds and habits will create either barriers or bridges to moving forward in life. Positive emotions broaden and build your resiliency strengths. Negative emotions limit and weaken your resiliency.⁸

Healthy grieving gives us hope that forming new bonds is possible. Hope is what makes the difference between being in the downward spiral, headed to despair, and the upward one, leading to acceptance. It is the power that keeps one going, the fuel that runs the engine, the medicine that brings healing to a wounded heart. It gives strength to face an uncertain future.

Healing is remembering, recollections, and reorganization. Embrace the opportunities to talk, remember, and celebrate all aspects of a friend, colleague, or loved one's life, personality, and accomplishments. Laughter as part of a memorial or funeral service is healthy, and it helps to keep our loved ones alive in our memories. Sharing stories honors your loved one, friend, or colleague.

Grief has often been compared to a journey that must be traveled. For some people the road is long and difficult with many bumps along the way. We all walk a lonesome path when any significant loss occurs. That doesn't mean that others cannot walk alongside to support and encourage us. But each of us alone must do the walking and talking.

We do not heal by getting over grief—we heal by going through grief. Like the old folk song,⁹ grief is truly "so high you can't get over it, so low you can't get under it, so wide you can't get around it, you got to go in at the door." We need to learn how to move through grief actively, make the process of mourning a healing one, and to be patient and tolerant with ourselves on our journey.

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