

Dealing With Loss

Understanding That Helps Guide Our Actions In Times of Loss

Many emotions are bound to arise when we are confronted with a significant loss. And, there is no kind of loss more significant than saying “Goodbye” to someone you love. Expect to have complicated thoughts and feelings throughout and long after this experience. Anytime you experience several emotions at once, you are likely to feel confused or even depressed. On the other hand, you might feel as if you want to “push back” at the mix of feelings welling up inside you, and this can quickly turn to frustration or anger.

This eGuide is designed to help you deal with the most common and basic emotion that lies underneath nearly else we experience when facing death and dying. Before giving

you any further advice, let me simply say that throughout the time of your loss and grieving be as gentle and patient toward yourself as you can. This is also true if you are supporting someone through loss and grief.

You may have a strong faith to help you get through the loss of a loved one. Or, you may not be particularly religious, but simply have a sense that the universe is relatively friendly. Regardless of what one believes prior to death, the profound mystery of what happens to our loved one provokes natural feelings of wonder, awe and dread, often all at the same time.

The simple truth is, we cannot exactly know what our loved one is experiencing or has experienced. The unknown provokes a natural reaction in all human beings, and this reaction drives some aspects of loss that can complicate how we work through our own sense of loss and how we support others through their loss.

The four points below address some of the common ways we experience significant, in particular the fear such loss can cause. In understanding these aspects of fear, you will be better able to deal with its impact when confronted with the loss of a loved one.

Fear is a normal and automatic response.

We all react to fear with a “flight or fight” response. When you first receive news of a loved one's impending death, you may be surprised that you initially struggle to inform others or clear your calendar and make time for visits. This is a “flight” response. On the other hand, you may find yourself, understandably, focusing upon medical issues and even becoming angry that a certain diagnosis wasn't made clearer to your loved one sooner. This is a “fight” response.

You and your loved one's close family and friends are going to have some “flight” or “fight” responses to this difficult situation. Family tensions that are normal on a day to day basis may become heightened as we shift our feelings from what we cannot control (death) to something that we can (support for one another and your loved one).

A family member might delay coming to visit because they were struggling with their own “flight” response. When they finally arrive, they could become the recipients of angry stares and remarks. This would be an expression of some family member's “fight” response. The simple acceptance that fear is driving these other heightened emotions will help you to calm down. And this will have a “ripple” effect amongst others who are visiting with your or your loved one.

Fear is simply nature's way of preparing us to face the future. If we love someone, the last thing we want to face is their final departure from our lives. The moment we hear that a loved one is dying, we naturally want at some level to not have this happen. It is not uncommon to experience “dread” in the pit of one's stomach. This is an aspect of what is commonly called, “anticipatory grief.”

Rather than avoid such feelings, use them to help you get ready. Yes, all of your emotions will be heightened, as well as other senses. Notice your loved one's surroundings. Make it more pleasant and colorful. There is a reason why flowers are sent to hospital rooms that are otherwise drab. Some family members bring photos and place them close to their loved one at bedside. Some bring a favorite CD with peaceful music. These and similar gestures help to surround your loved one with beauty and memories, all expressions of your love.

Take time to collect your thoughts and feelings and ask questions.

You don't need to make extensive notes, but simply jot down thoughts, feelings and questions. This will have several benefits. First, you will almost immediately begin to feel you have some control over the situation as you take notice of your thoughts, become familiar with your feelings and begin to interact with the medical persons caring for your loved one.

Sifting through your thoughts, feelings and questions helps you to clarify what is going on within your mind and heart. As you “see” yourself, you might also be somewhat surprised that you can also “see” others more clearly. Other family members and friends,

but especially your loved one may also have similar thoughts, feelings and questions. Because you have taken a little bit of care over your own thoughts, feelings and questions you can now direct more of your energy toward providing reassurance to your family and loved one about theirs.

Shift your focus to include a wider perspective of your loved one.

While sadness is certainly a fundamental feeling that everyone will experience, it by no means is the only one in your hearts. Your loved one is dying, but do recall that they spent much more time living, and that those vibrant years with you still count.

Just because actors on television and film often depict people speaking in hushed and somber tones with someone who is dying, no one has to follow someone else's script. Humor, when appropriately applied, can be a powerful way for family and friends to be present with their loved one. Gentle playfulness, sharing humorous stories with those at bedside that involved your loved one can "lift" the atmosphere.

Take your cue from your loved one. If they are able to go along with it, engage them in a fondly remembered story. They will be comforted by these familiar memories and the laughter, in appropriate doses, will be as much medicine for them as any other they have been prescribed.

Speak to your loved one in other ways besides using words.

Many times family members will ask me, "Chaplain, what should I say?" I respond, "Speak with sincerity and honesty. Use kind and gentle words." But, also, if you have the privilege to journey with your loved one as they approach death, realize this is a precious time for both of you, as well as others at bedside. If you feel overwhelmed and cannot find the "right" words to say, don't let this stop you from conveying what you feel.

Words are not the only way to express the most important things in your heart. Allow for silence. Take their hand and hold it lightly in yours. Look into their eyes and let them look

into yours. Forget your worries for a short while. Let your eyes relax and allow your face to soften into a gentle smile. Love them. Let them love you.

Summary.

We can and do experience a wide arrange of deep feelings when confronted with death, and fear underlies nearly all of them. We might fear that our loved one will suffer. We might fear that we will say the wrong thing, or not say the right thing, or miss saying anything at all. All kinds of real and imagined fears can and do arise, and can influence other feelings such as anger, frustration, disappointment and despair.

Whether you openly express your feelings, or keep them quietly to yourself, ignoring them altogether is not advised. It is okay to find a quiet space and take a bit of time for yourself away from all that is going on with your loved one. As your sort through your thoughts and feelings, you will be able to more appropriately express them, and you will be a better support for others experiencing similar issues.

Finally, know that you need not be alone in all this. Your loved one will most likely be either in a hospital room or at home with hospice care. Ask for and use their resources, such as a social worker or a chaplain. It helps to have someone who is not necessarily a family member, but is a trustworthy guide for you and your family as you walk with your loved one in their final days or hours. Their expertise and access to further resources for you in a difficult time can make a great deal of a difference to you, your family and friends, and your loved one who is dying.