

Healthy Grieving

Grief is something we all face in our lives, and this is especially apparent in the context of our current public health crisis. You may currently be grieving someone you have lost to COVID-19 or just grieving the loss of what your life was like prior to this pandemic. Whenever we face significant loss, grieving is seldom easy. We recognize that it is impossible to do justice to this topic in such a brief document. However, we believe that the information herein may be useful to you. Grieving is a natural and important part of life. This brief handout is designed to help inform you about common reactions to grieving and to provide useful tips to promote healthy grieving.

Common emotional reactions:

- Shock, disbelief, denial, numbness
- Longing
- Anger, irritability and frustration
- Sadness
- Guilt and self blame
- Fear and anxiety
- Helplessness
- Apathy

Common cognitive reactions:

- Poor concentration
- Indecisiveness
- Confusion
- Lapses of memory
- Preoccupation with thoughts or images of the deceased
- Difficulty judging what is important

Common physical reactions:

- Tightness in chest and/or throat
- Sensitivity to loud noises
- Fatigue and lack of energy
- Muscle tension and soreness
- Gastrointestinal distress
- Headaches
- Changes in sleep or appetite
- Increased accidents, mistakes

Other common reactions:

- Questions of religion or life philosophy
- Loss of meaning
- Loss of direction
- Cynicism
- Intolerance of others
- Withdrawal from normal activities
- Resentment toward others

Recommendations for healthy grieving:

- Talk to friends and family about your feelings. It is especially important to speak with others who are also grieving.
- Give yourself time. Don't rush the process.
- Take care of yourself. Maintain healthy eating, sleeping, exercise and relaxation.
- Participation in cultural and/or religious services/ceremonies, such as funerals and wakes can be very helpful.
- Avoid alcohol and other drug use. During times of heightened emotions, drugs and alcohol can intensify those emotions and leave you feeling overwhelmed.

Why are some of my friends so upset while others seem so calm?

As you have read on the first page of this document, it is common to experience shock, denial or disbelief when you learn about a death. Sometimes this can last just a few minutes and sometimes it can last for months or years. In fact, you may experience intense periods of sadness followed by periods of numbness. Keep in mind that others

who are also grieving may also be experiencing these shifting emotions. It is natural to have periods of denial or of not feeling anything. Please give yourself and your friends space to have some time for denial, shock, and disbelief. Sometimes it takes a while before disbelief gives way to sadness and the realization of the loss. Try to find friends to talk with who seem to be experiencing similar emotions to your own.

When to seek counseling for yourself or recommend it to a friend:

- It will be natural for concentration to suffer for few weeks, and it may feel as if you are just going through the motions as you attend classes. However, if you or a friend find are unable to function in a significant life activity, such as school or work, for more than a couple of days, counseling should be considered.
- It is normal to be reminded of other significant losses experienced earlier in life. If these past losses bring up overwhelming feelings, counseling may be helpful.
- Some disruption in appetite and sleeping can be a normal part of grieving. However, severe and/or sustained changes in sleep and appetite can signify a need for counseling.
- While thinking about mortality can be normal after the death of a peer, suicidal thoughts should be taken seriously and require professional support.
- Excessive use of alcohol and/or other drugs suggests a need for professional support.

How to seek support for yourself or recommend it to a friend:

Dickinson is here to help students who are struggling with stress and grief at this difficult time. Please reach out to staff and faculty you are connected with to let them know how you are doing. You can also access the following offices for support:

Wellness Center

Any student (on or off campus) who has concerns about grief or other mental health issues can call the Wellness Center (at 717-245-1663) and ask to speak to a counselor. This counselor can assess your needs, help connect you with resources for coping with your concerns, and provide you with information about treatment options (e.g., how to connect with mental health providers in your area).

In some cases (especially if suicidal thoughts are involved) you may have an urgent need for professional support. If you feel that you need professional support immediately, call the Department of Public Safety at 717-245-1111. We have student life professionals and counselors on-call in cases of emergency 24 hours a day.

The Center for Spirituality and Social Justice

The Center for Spirituality and Social Justice (CSSJ) also provides support of a religious nature and can be helpful when questioning life's meaning. You may contact the director of CSSJ at 717-245-1577.