

Common Questions about Grief and Grief Support

WHY IS IT DIFFICULT TO TALK ABOUT GRIEF?

It's awkward and uncomfortable. It is difficult to talk about my own emotions, let alone talk about someone else's. Many times people talk in extremes.

Throughout our lives, most of us have been taught how to acquire, not how to lose. No wonder losing someone or something is strange and painful.

WHAT IS GRIEF?

Grief is triggered by a loss of some sort – losing someone or something with which we had an attachment. Grief has different levels and intensities. We grieve a little when our favorite shirt is ruined and must be thrown away. We grieve a little more when our favorite team loses the big game. More intense grief comes when a beloved pet dies, when a valued relationship ends, when dreams for our futures evaporate, or when a loved one dies.

How we define grief will heavily influence how we respond to and attempt to alleviate grief.

- If we believe that grief is merely sadness, then our goal will be merely to create happiness.
- If we believe that grief is only sorrow due to losing someone or something, then we will just try to replace the loss with someone or something else.
- If we believe that grief is basically a temporary interruption to endure, then we will just tough it out.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GRIEF AND MOURNING?

While they are often used interchangeably, the words “grief” and “mourning” contain a subtle but important difference.

Grief is Internal

The term “grief” refers to our thoughts and feelings on the inside. After a loss, our initial, private response is grief. We feel bereaved, which means “torn apart.” The grief process is the brain's way of dealing with a matter it can't completely comprehend in the moment; so it takes time to sort through it all,

Mourning is External

While grief is the emotional reaction/response to loss, mourning is the expression of the grief. Mourning takes our internal grief and externalizes it in the form of an action, a ceremony, or a ritual that activates social support. It is essential for creating forward movement in a state of grief. Without external mourning, grief lingers inside us.

HOW DOES GRIEF AFFECT US?

Grief impacts us physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Understanding the effects of grief helps us to minister to others in grief.

Spiritually, grief can cause doubt, anger toward God, a demotivation to pray (if our prayers of healing were not answered), and a general apathy towards spiritual things.



WHAT ARE THINGS THAT COMPLICATE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF GRIEF?

Subtle childhood messages

During childhood, we may have heard these messages:

- “Don’t feel bad, don’t cry.” **Message:** avoid negative emotions.
- “Don’t cry, have a cookie.” **Message:** numb your pain.
- “You lost a toy! We can buy another.” **Message:** replace your loss.
- “Just keep your feelings to yourself.” **Message:** stuff your pain.

Misconceptions about God

Christ did not come to take away our pain, but to support us through the pain. “Even though I walk **through** the valley of the shadow of death” (Ps. 23) — not *around, over, or under*, but through. God did not prevent Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from being put in fiery furnace but was there with them.

WHAT IS OUR ROLE IN HELPING SOMEONE IN GRIEF?

Our goal is not to take away someone’s pain, but to support them as they go through the pain. We want to encourage people to express their pain. We need to avoid trying to fix them.

“Personal ministry is not about always knowing what to say. It is not about fixing everything in sight that is broken. Personal ministry is about connecting people with Christ so that they are able to think as he would have them think, desire what he says is best, and do what he calls them to do even if their circumstances never get ‘fixed.’” - Paul David Tripp

“We forget that God's primary goal is not changing our situations or relationships so that we can be happy, but changing us through our situations and relationships so that we will be holy.” - Paul David Tripp

Being a Comforter Means Being a Paraclete

Jesus has given us the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Paraclete (John 14:6, 26). So we are never alone, even in the midst of suffering, because the Paraclete has been given to walk alongside us. And we, too, can be outward signs of the Paraclete in other’s lives – by developing a “Paraclete” life style.

The word “Paraclete” (Greek: παράκλητος, Latin: paracletus) **means** comforter, advocate, intercessor, helper. One who comes along side. All roles we can play in comforting someone in grief.

Much like Aaron and Hur came along side Moses and supported him during the battle with the Amaleks (Exodus 17), we are to support one another.

“We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.” — 1 Thess 5:14

*“For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, **encouraging, comforting and urging** you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.”* — 1 Thess 2:11-12

The Pyramid of Support

The way we love one another cannot be standardized. It must be in the context of a specific need for specific person. Think of Mary and Martha.

However, the support we offer a grieving person can be categorized into three different levels. Sometimes the levels are distinct; sometimes they overlap.

Using Paul's words, supporting a grieving person requires us to do three things:



HOW DO WE HELP SOMEONE IN GRIEF?

1 Kings 19: God Ministers to Elijah During a Time of Grief (and ways we can help others)

He [Elijah] came to a broom bush, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. "I have had enough, Lord," he said. "Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." (vv.4-5).

God ministers to Elijah with:

- REST: "Then he lay down under the bush and fell asleep." (v.5)
- FOOD: "Get up and eat."
- PHYSICAL TOUCH: "an angel touched him"
- TIME TO PROCESS: "he traveled forty days and forty nights" (v 8).
- FREEDOM TO VENT: "What are you doing here, Elijah?"(vss. 9 and 13).
- OPPORTUNITY TO SERVE: "Go, return on your way" (v.15)
- COMPANIONSHIP: "anoint Elisha son of Shaphat" (v. 16).
- PERSPECTIVE: "I will preserve 7,000 others" (v.18)

Nancy Guthrie

"The very definition of grieving with hope, or grieving well, is to have taken hold of the confidence that this life is not all there is."