

The Grief Process, a Natural Healing Response to Grief

Since no two people will experience a loss in exactly the same way, there are no formulas for how much a loss will hurt or how long it will last. But there is a natural and common response to loss that promotes healing and growth. The natural healing response to loss is a process called grief. Grief is a natural part of the cycle of change. People who have experienced a loss often feel fearful and out of control. One way to gain assurance and control is to understand that grief is a natural healing process with experiences that are common to many. This is not to suggest that any two people will grieve in the same way or even in the same time frame. Neither is it to suggest that grief unfolds in a predictable fashion. The experiencing of grief can be thought of as a weaving or restoration of a wound that occurs over time. The wound of grief is healed as the person is able to move backward and forward through various grief experiences.

Common Levels and Experiences of Grief

- **Initial Awareness** Initial awareness is the first intense recognition that the loss has happened. It is often described as a "hard blow to the chest" or as "a knife thrust into the heart."
- **Safeguarding** This is nature's way of limiting awareness of the loss. A way of conserving energy and protecting us from being overwhelmed by the pain and confusion of the loss. Examples of safeguarding include shock, anger, avoidance, searching and bargaining. These defenses help us pace our strength and energy.
- **Awareness - Anguish and Despair** These intense periods of grief happen as the full significance of the loss is realized. Awareness is grief's darkest hour. Periods of awareness include intense waves of longing, loneliness, anguish, despair and sorrow. These waves often come as memories of the loss are aroused and realized.
- **Restructuring and Restoration** These are experiences where new skills and activities help establish new patterns so that life can be resumed. Energy returns for the tasks of life. Perspective on the loss is gained. It is possible to remember without pain.
- **Growth** As the loss is remembered and integrated into the present there is once again energy to invest into the present and future. This is more than survival. Personal strengths, insights and compassion have been gained. A future can once again be imagined and new relationships and opportunities can be explored and experienced.