

What Is Grief?

“Oh that
my grief
were
actually
weighed
and
laid
in the
balances
together
with my
calamity!”
(Job
6:2).

The Bible contains no more poignant scene than that of David grieving at the death of his rebellious son Absalom: “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Samuel 18:33). King David was overwhelmed by his grief. Often, a person who has lost a loved one feels something similar.

What is grief? What should you expect when you experience it? The feelings of loss are part of a bundle of emotions that together are called “grief.” A couple in a grief support class described “grief” this way:

Grief is like being in a deep dark pit with no way out. . . . Grief is a feeling of being under a dark veil that you cannot lift. There is a feeling that there is something heavy across your heart and a tight band around your head. Grief is total despair. Grief is a feeling of helplessness that seems unbearable.¹

“Grief” or “grieving” may be defined as “the process of experiencing the psychological, social, physical, and spiritual reactions to your perception of loss.”² Grief affects “your feelings, thoughts, and attitudes,” “your behavior with others,” “your health and body symptoms,” and “your relationship with God.”³ Grief is not just one emotion, but many. It may manifest itself in anger and resentment, in loneliness and despair, in feelings of guilt, in despondency and depression, in estrangement from friends and family, even in physical illness.

GRIEF IS NATURAL

Many people in today’s world believe that they must face bereavement stoically and never show any sorrow or emotion, especially in public. However, the loss of anyone or anything significant rightly causes grief. God

¹Ron Williams, “What Happens When Your World Crashes In?: The Enormous Pain of Grief” in Don and Ron Williams, *Walking with Those Who Weep: A Guide to Grief Support* (Pulaski, Tenn.: Sain Publications, 1996), 11.

²Jim Hughes, *Good Grief and How to Experience It*, Class Notes, Ministries with Senior Adults, Abilene Christian University, 9–13 January 2006, 1. Hughes spoke of the “perception” of loss. If a loss is not real but only perceived, the grief that results will be as real as if it had actually occurred. Jacob’s mourning for his son Joseph was real, even though Joseph was not actually dead (Genesis 37:33–35).

³Ibid.

made us capable of forming attachments, of loving, of being attracted to other people. To grieve is to demonstrate that such an attraction existed. Grieving, then, is the method God provided us for adjusting to the loss of something or someone we have valued. Doug Manning wrote,

Grieving is the natural way of working through the loss of a love. Grieving is not weakness nor absence of faith. Grieving is as natural as crying when you hurt, sleeping when you are tired, or sneezing when your nose itches. It is nature's way of healing a broken heart.

Grief is not an enemy—it is a friend. It is the natural process of walking through hurt and growing because of the walk. Let it happen.⁴

We need to be willing to let our defenses down, to admit our feelings, and to grieve when we have suffered a loss.

GRIEF IS UNIVERSAL

All human beings experience grief, whether or not they admit it. Grief is the consequence of losing a loved one:

a spouse,
a child,
a parent,
a sibling (a brother or sister),
a more distant relative
(grandparent, aunt, uncle, cousin),
a friend or neighbor,
a business associate,
a brother or sister in Christ.

When we lose someone very close to us, such as a child or a spouse, we may believe that our grief is greater than any other. However, we have no way of knowing whether the death of a close friend hurts someone else as much as the death of our loved one hurts us.

Other kinds of losses also produce grief: losing a job; a pet; health; a part or function of the body, such as sight or hearing; or belongings that have been stolen or destroyed by a fire or a flood. Sorrow results from leaving familiar surroundings because of a move or separation from family members because of divorce. Grief is a natural reaction to dashed hopes, the loss of a dream, or anticipated death because of terminal illness.

⁴Doug Manning, *Don't Take My Grief Away: What to Do When You Lose a Loved One* (Philadelphia: In-Sight Books, Harper & Row, 1979), 66–67.

No matter what we have lost, the grieving process follows the same basic pattern. Our feelings are similar, though they may vary in intensity.⁵

We may be tempted to respond, “How can the death of a pet or the loss of a job be compared to the death of my loved one?” However, the fact is that one person may grieve for a pet as deeply as another grieves for a family member. No one should belittle another's sadness, no matter how inappropriate it may seem to be. Our own grief over loss always seems to be greater than the grief experienced by others.

GRIEF IS PERSONAL

The extent and manner of grieving will vary from one person to another. When a loved one dies, the extent of one's grief depends on his relationship with the individual who died, on the circumstances connected to the death, and on his personality. Therese A. Rando listed many factors that influence grief: psychological factors (the nature of the lost relationship and the characteristics of the deceased); personal characteristics (coping behaviors, personality, and mental health); the specific circumstances of the death (whether or not the death was untimely); social factors (one's social support system); and physical factors (including drugs, sedatives, and nutrition).⁶ Also important are spiritual factors (such as funeral rituals and personal faith).⁷ No one can determine, based on how others feel, how he himself ought to feel about the death of a friend or a family member. Though the grieving process follows a predictable pattern, everyone's grief is unique.

THE EXPRESSION OF GRIEF VARIES

While all grieve, people do not express their grief in the same way. Not only do we differ in the way we experience grief, but we also differ

⁵Westberg divided griefs into “little griefs” and “large griefs” and said that both are natural. (Granger E. Westberg, *Good Grief* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971], 11.)

⁶Therese A. Rando, *How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1988), 47–61.

⁷Jim Hughes used Rando's listing and added the spiritual factors. (Hughes, 12–17.) Probably, our personal experiences with grief are also influenced by cultural and societal expectations of which we are largely unaware.

in the way we express our grief. One person may deal with his grief privately and individually. He seeks no help from others, and apparently needs none.⁸ Some, seeing his dry eyes, may think he does not grieve. The truth may be that he does grieve, but never where others can see him. Another may grieve openly. The difference between the two is not in the extent of their grief, but in its expression.

Further, the expression of grief varies from one culture to another⁹—from place to place, from time to time, and even from one family to another. In some cultures mourners vocalize grief with loud wailing. The fact that these people weep louder and longer does not necessarily mean that they feel the loss of their dead relatives any more than do those in other cultures where weeping is more subdued.

We cannot escape the differences between cultures; we will be, to a great extent, shaped by them. Therefore, each person's grief will most likely be expressed in a way that is in keeping with his own personality and in keeping with the culture in which he lives.

GRIEF MAY BEGIN BEFORE DEATH OCCURS

The grieving process sometimes begins even before a death occurs. If, for example, one's mother or father or husband or wife has a terminal illness—and especially if that illness is physically or mentally debilitating—then the grieving process is likely to begin long before death occurs. The sick person's relatives will feel, to a great extent, that they have already lost their loved one even though the illness lingers on. In such cases, when the moment of death arrives, it may come almost as a relief to the relatives of the one who has been sick for so long.

⁸Westberg described such people: "Some people just do not express emotions and do not need to. Within themselves they probably struggle with many of these stages [of grief], but somehow temperamentally they are able to handle these problems very well by themselves. They do not need or want anyone 'meddling' in their lives by trying to help them through their grief" (Westberg, 57–58).

⁹Cultural differences regarding death and burial customs are discussed in "Cross-Cultural Patterns of Bereavement Behavior," in Michael R. Leming and George E. Dickinson, *Understanding Dying, Death, and Bereavement* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985), 235–61.

GRIEF IS NECESSARY

However grief is expressed, it must be experienced before one who has suffered a significant loss can be whole again. Jim Hughes wrote, "There is no way around the pain that you feel when someone you love dies. You can try to delay it, deny it, avoid thinking about it, minimize it, or get away from it, but sooner or later you are going to have to go through it."¹⁰ Anyone who has suffered a loss must somehow work through the grieving process in order to return to a full and happy life. Hughes said that the pain of grief is like a debt: a person can "pay now or pay more later."¹¹

GOD PROVIDES COMFORT FOR THOSE WHO GRIEVE

God is the "God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3). He does not intend for grief to be permanent; rather, He wants those who are grieving to find comfort. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). Paul, after explaining about Christ's return and the resurrection of the dead, wrote, "Comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18). If the grief of His children lasts until the second coming, God Himself "will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 21:4). A Christian who loses a loved one should not expect to grieve forever, but should expect eventually to find comfort in the Lord.

CONCLUSION

The person who has lost someone dear must not let grief overwhelm him and cause him to neglect his responsibilities. While he needs time to mourn, he must remember that others are dependent on him; he does his departed loved one no honor by neglecting the loved ones who are still with him.

When you lose a loved one, give yourself permission to grieve, and spend time in grieving; but look forward to experiencing the comfort that comes from the "God of all comfort." Do not forget your responsibility to your loved ones who remain alive.

Coy Roper

¹⁰Hughes, 18–19.

¹¹Ibid.