

Grieving

Grief is an emotion that everyone will experience at some point in life. Grief is a feeling of sadness, a reaction to some loss in a person's life. A dictionary definition describes grief this way: "Keen mental suffering or distress over affliction or loss." It can be described as sorrow, mourning, bereavement, torment, and heartache. Grief is a normal human emotion, and sometimes it can cause us so much pain that faith itself can be challenged or even lost in wondering, "Why?"

Examples of Grieving in the Bible

Grief has existed as long as sin has existed on this earth. The earliest references in the Bible to grief are mentioned already in Genesis, the very first book of the Bible. "And Sarah died... and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her" (Gen. 23:2). In 2 Samuel 18:33, King David wept over the death of his son Absalom, even though Absalom had risen up against him. The writer of Ecclesiastes (3:4) tells us that there is a time to mourn. In the New Testament, Jesus grieved with Mary over the death of her brother, Lazarus (John 11:33). Jesus also wept over the city of Jerusalem, knowing that He would be rejected by its occupants, and sent to die the death of the cross (Luke 19:41).

Types of Grief

There are many types of grief. Grief is sadness over any type of loss that one might experience. The most obvious and most commonly talked about situation is the death of a dear one, but there are countless other matters that can bring grief: the loss of a loved one to unbelief is a very painful experience, perhaps the most painful of all to a parent when a child loses faith; learning that you or a loved one has a serious, possibly life-changing illness; learning that your unborn child may not survive, or will live life with a disability; or having a family member or a good friend move out of the area. All of these are losses that can cause heartache, and all of them are a new reality that a person has to learn to live with. What has been familiar in life is lost. There are many other types of losses as well.

The Grief Process

Grieving is a process. Throughout history, different cultures have adopted varying customs for a "period of mourning." In the Bible we are told that Joseph mourned seven days for his father (Gen. 50:10). Jewish custom sets forth a series of expectations for specific periods of time following the death of a dear one. In some African cultures, widows are expected to mourn for a year, and children who have suffered the loss of a parent are expected to mourn for three months. This is not to imply that there is a specific timeframe for grieving, but to recognize that it is a process that takes time.

One current model for understanding the process of grief has five steps. This model is only one way to try to understand grieving, this is in no way how it works for everyone. People may experience the steps in a different order, or may not experience all of them. The idea of a five-step process can help someone who is grieving understand where they are at, and possibly can help friends understand how they can help and support.

In this way of looking at grief, the first step is denial and isolation. This is a response that helps cushion the shock of the news of the loss. We can't quite believe what has happened, so we try to block out the reality.

The second step is anger. The intense pain that we feel inside is redirected somewhere else. It may be at close friends and family, or at a doctor who was not able to cure an illness. We know, rationally, that no one is to blame, but such acute pain inside us has to find a way out.

Third comes bargaining. This can be a way that, in our own minds, we attempt to retake control. "If only we had seen

a doctor sooner...” might be a thought, or maybe someone would on some level try to make a bargain: “If you could let him live a while longer, I would...” and privately make some type of promise. Bargaining is another way that our minds try to soften the blow of the loss.

Depression is the fourth step. This can be felt as an overwhelming sadness, or as regret. Maybe we feel bad about spending time grieving, and not spending enough time with our friends or children. We might feel sad that we didn’t spend more time with one who has passed away. It can be a quiet thought as we try to let go of a loved one, or of a familiar reality.

The final step is acceptance. This does not always happen, and it is a blessing when someone can reach this point.

The process of grieving is very personal and singular. No one can say how another could or should deal with loss. It is very important to allow anyone who is grieving to experience and deal with the grief. Resisting grief can prolong and make more difficult the process of healing.

How to Help

People who are grieving need the love and support of friends, family, and especially God’s congregation. It can be hard to know how to help. Support can be in the form of practical help. Meals can be brought or housecleaning provided to a family who has no time or energy to think about temporal needs.

Emotional support is even more important. The grieving one might not even understand what type of emotional support is needed. As they experience the different emotions related to grief, they might be angry that someone wants to encourage them when they are hurting so bad. Often, what a grieving person needs is simply to have someone listen. A simple, “I’m sorry...” lets them know that they are remembered and gives them an opening to talk if they want to. If they don’t want to talk at that point, they can take comfort in knowing that others are thinking of them in their pain.

Someone on the outside of a situation looking in knows that things will get better, knows the pain will become less intense, but the grieving one needs the time and space to come to that realization personally. Telling someone, “I know how you feel!” seems honest only if you have been through exactly the same situation, whether it’s losing a spouse, or having a child leave faith. Emotionally supporting someone can be as simple as giving them space when they are not interested in being around other people. Some people find professional grief counseling to be a great help.

Spiritual support is the most important type of help that can be given. Being surrounded by believers who can encourage with the gospel is probably the most uplifting help of all. The prayers of the believers on behalf of one in mourning are a powerful gift. Services in remembrance of someone are always appropriate. Simply believing gives comfort that a dear one has gone home to heaven, or reminds us in the case of loved ones leaving the kingdom, that “Where there is life, there is hope.” When a departed loved one did not leave the testimony of a believer, the support and encouragement of God’s children is especially important. We can focus on acceptance and personal hope of heaven. We can also take comfort that life and death, and life’s situations and trials that come up in our lives, are all known to our Heavenly Father.

Stephanie Westerinen

Discussion Questions:

1. How can you help someone who is grieving?

2. What should or should not be said to someone who is grieving?

3 What have been your personal experiences? What did others say or do that was helpful? What might others have done differently?