

CAL MARITIME

How to Cope with Loss, Grief, Death & Dying - Professionally & Personally

© 2002 Kirsti A. Dyer, MD, MS All Rights Reserved. E-mail: griefdoc@journeyofhearts.org

The California Maritime Academy - CSUM California State University, Maritime

SOC 210. Dying: The Final Stage of Living February 7, 2002

Ways of Coping with Loss & Death

The Basics

Following a sudden loss, death or tragic event, it is important for the grieving person to remember to take care of him/herself. Focusing on the basic survival needs for the body is especially needed during time of stress and uncertainty:

- Take it one hour at a time, one day at a time.
- Maintain a normal routine. Try to keep doing regular activities. Adding structure into a daily routing will help the grieving person regain a sense of control.
- Get enough sleep or at least enough rest.
- Try and get some regular exercise. This can also help relieve stress and tension.
- Keep a balanced diet. Watch out for junk food, or high calorie comfort food binges.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Drink alcohol in moderation. Alcohol should not be used as a way of masking the pain.
- Do what comforts, sustains & recharges.
- Remember other past losses and the coping strategies used to survived them. Draw on these inner strengths again.

Ways of Coping - More Concrete

- Give yourself permission to grieve. It is important to work through the difficult emotions. An ungrieved loss remains alive in our unconscious.
- Talking about your emotions can help a grieving person work through them. Talk with someone you trust—parents, family, other relatives, trusted friends, school counselor, physician or a spiritual leader.
- Tell your story. Telling the story of the grief gives a voice to the loss. Telling and retelling the story of grief is a way to make the loss real. Each time the story is repeated, the reality of the loss becomes more undeniable.
- Listen to each other. One of the most valuable things we can do to help each other heal is listen to the stories.
- For news making losses, keep up with the news reports, as new information becomes available. However, take breaks away from the intense news coverage for periods of time.
- If needed avoid media coverage all together. Repeatedly reliving the event in images or hearing how frightening the event was can hinder a person's ability to get over the loss.
- Reflect on what is important and brings special meaning to life. Losses can be view as a "Wake-up" call, chance to re-evaluate life and life's priorities.
- Draw strength from your spiritual or religious beliefs and traditions.
- Attend (or organize) memorial or funeral services.
- Avoid making any major life-changing decisions. Instead use the time to evaluate priorities—which many have changed following the loss, death or life-changing event.
- Spend time with family and/or loved ones.
- If the feelings remain as strong or last longer than four to six weeks, or thoughts are out of

control, causing inactivating depression or anxiety, the grieving person may want to seek professional help to help you sort through your feelings. He/she should contact their Employee Assistance Program, primary care physician, or mental healthcare provider.

- Many begin healing by giving. By thinking of and helping others the grieving can begin their own healing process.

Ways of Relieving Grief

Below are some additional techniques which can be helpful in relieving the intense emotion of grief.

Things to Do:

- Express emotions down on paper via creative writing, journaling, poetry, even list making.
- Take slow deep breaths, especially when feeling tense.
- Soak in a warm bath, or warm bubble bath.
- Walk, run, hike, dance, play tennis, swim, ride a bike, climb a rock—just get moving.
- Attend religious services.
- Plant a "memory garden."
- Send your condolences.
- Walk or run for charity.
- Design a Website.
- Organize or attend a memorial service.
- Sing, listen to soothing music.
- Pray or meditate.
- Hug a loved one.
- Get a massage.
- Create a memorial—quilt, mural, sculpture etc.
- Help someone else less fortunate.
- Volunteer.

Things to Sense:

- Watch favorite old uplifting movies.
- Attend the theater.
- Go to the symphony or music concert.
- Look through old photo albums, alone or with loved ones.
- Get out in nature.
- Walk through a garden.
- Look up at the night sky.
- Watch the sun rise or set.
- Watch the waves at the ocean.
- Listen to a brook, lake, river or ocean.
- Smell - your favorite smells e.g. baking bread, pine forests, spring flowers, lavender.

Things to Feel:

- A deep sense of calmness.
- Feeling the wind on your face.
- Tumbling down a snowy or grassy hill.
- Having water splash and tingle your skin.
- Seeing a rainbow emerge from the clouds.

Places to Just "Be"

- Under a tree.
- At the beach.
- On a rock.
- In nature.
- By a stream or lake.
- On a bench.
- Under a waterfall.
- In a warm bath or hot tub.
- On top of a high mountain.
- In a church setting.
- In a setting with a breath-taking view.
- At sunrise or sunset.
- Sitting quietly, calmly.

More Ways of Helping

People have found many different ways of helping them cope with loss, death and tragedy. Some turn to creative ways of expressing their grief, including activism. The list that follows are some of the best suggestions. For more suggestions see the reference on "Creatively Expressing Grief."

- Organize and plan a memorial service - to honor those who have died.
- Create a Memorial - Bulletin Board of Letters, poems pictures, sculpture, collage
- Donate—money, time, food clothing—to a favorite charity, homeless shelter, animal shelter or home for abused women.
- Donate blood at your local blood center.
- Write sympathy and support notes to those affected by the loss.
- If the loss involved an accident, thank the emergency and hospital personnel, highway patrol, police and firefighters for helping.
- Tell your loved ones and friends how you feel about them often.
- Perform random acts of kindness. This will help to remind one there is tenderness and thoughtfulness in the world. Pay the bridge toll for the person behind you. Smile at the store clerk. Let someone else go first in line.
- Be kind to others. Make space for the car merging in on the freeway. Don't use your horn unless it is absolutely necessary.
- Volunteer services, offer assistance to someone in need.
- Do something that can benefit others. Take a first aid or CPR class.
- Plant a tree or flowers in a garden in memory.

Resources:

Dyer KA. 9-11: United in Courage & Grief. Ways of Coping then Helping. October 7, 2001. Available at:

http://journeyofhearts.org/kirstimd/911_bad.htm

Dyer KA. Creatively Expressing Grief. December 2001. Available at: http://journeyofhearts.org/kirstimd/create_grief.htm

Dyer KA. Healthy Ways of Coping. 1998. Available at: <http://journeyofhearts.org/kirstimd/coping.htm>

Dyer KA. More Health Ways to Cope with Grief. 1998. Available at: <http://journeyofhearts.org/kirstimd/coping2.htm>

Dyer KA. Coping with the Blues. 1999. Available at: <http://journeyofhearts.org/kirstimd/blues1.htm>

Dyer KA. More Suggestions for Dealing with the Blues. 1999. Available at: <http://journeyofhearts.org/kirstimd/blues.htm>

Dyer KA. Volunteerism. 1999. Available at: <http://journeyofhearts.org/kirstimd/volprojects.htm>.

© 2002 Kirsti A. Dyer, MD, MS, FAAETS. Journey of Hearts, <http://journeyofhearts.org/jofh.html>. All rights reserved.

A single copy of this article can be made for personal or professional use.

Contact Dr. Dyer at griefdoc@journeyofhearts.org for permission to use materials from this presentation for other ventures.