

Coping with Loss

Life is full of losses. Some losses are minor and temporary. Others are major and can disrupt your entire life. Any loss can put your body and mind into a state of stress.

Yet, no matter how severe or painful a loss is, you can learn to respond to it in ways that help you to cope. Doing so will help you to heal in time.

HEALTH TERMS

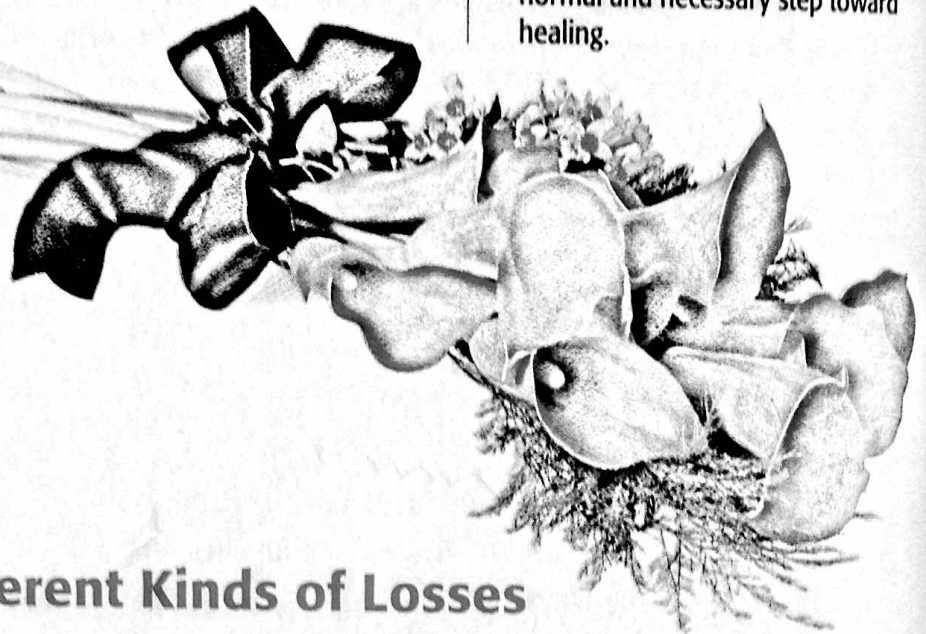
grief reaction

delayed grief response

closure

HEALTH CONCEPTS

- Any loss can cause a stress response.
- The loss of a loved one is one of the greatest stressors a person can face.
- People who suffer a major loss may go through a special five-stage process that enables them to deal with the loss.
- Grieving after a major loss is a normal and necessary step toward healing.



Different Kinds of Losses

Have you ever lost something that could not be replaced? Maybe a pet died or ran away. Perhaps you lost an important athletic contest, such as a championship game. These are all losses. So are break-ups between girlfriends and boyfriends, rejection by a once-close friend, or the loss of a job by you or a parent. Maybe you have had to change apartments, schools, or neighborhoods, feeling the loss of whatever—or whomever—you had to leave behind.

Your reactions to each loss may vary. Any loss requires change, and that change can be stressful. Depending on its value to you, you may respond to any loss as a minor or a major stressor. Note that a loss does not have to have a dollar value to be important. Sometimes, your emotional attachment to an object, situation, pet, or person can make its loss even more painful.

The Stages of Loss

When a loss occurs, it is common and natural to experience a grief reaction. A **grief reaction** is *an individual's total response to a major loss*. This reaction can take many forms and includes many stages, from feelings of emptiness or deep sadness to feelings of intense anger.

Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a psychiatrist who has done pioneering work on the related subjects of death and dying, has identified five emotional stages that both dying and grieving people go through. These five stages, which might be experienced by anyone suffering a major loss, include:

- **Stage 1: Denial.** Denial is a person's initial reaction to any loss. At this stage, a person who has suffered a significant loss cannot believe the loss has occurred.
- **Stage 2: Anger.** A person next moves from denial to anger, or the "Why me?" stage. During this stage, the person may be critical, demanding, or uncooperative.
- **Stage 3: Bargaining.** As the reality of the loss sets in, the anger begins to subside and is replaced by bargaining. The person may pray or promise to change if only the lost person or object can be returned, even for a while.
- **Stage 4: Depression.** This stage is often marked by silence and withdrawal. Earlier feelings of disbelief, isolation, anger, and rage are replaced with a deep sense of quiet sadness.
- **Stage 5: Acceptance.** This is the last stage in dealing with a deep loss. While the depression stage may leave a person feeling helpless, this last stage can involve a sense of power, allowing the person to face reality in constructive ways and make significant and meaningful gestures surrounding the idea of the loss.

Kübler-Ross also noted that another emotion, hope, operates through all of the five stages. This hope keeps alive the thought that the lost item, situation, or person might somehow be returned.



When You're "At a Loss"

What should you do when someone you know well is going through the grieving process and you feel "at a loss" about how to help?

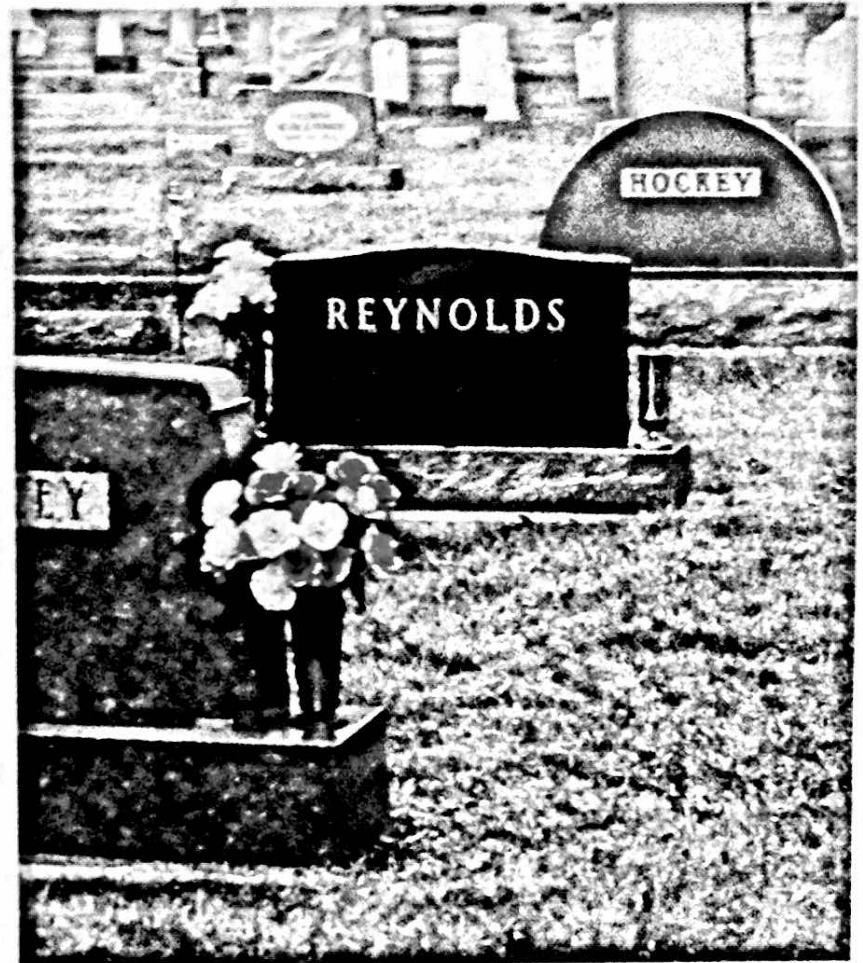
- Be available to talk or just be with the person when you're wanted.
- Be a good listener. Avoid asking lots of probing questions.
- Avoid making suggestions about how something else will make up for the loss.
- Be patient. The person may not be rejecting you personally but may simply need to be alone.
- Talk about the person who has died, sharing fond memories.
- Respect the other person's way of grieving even if it isn't your own.
- Write a note. You don't have to say anything more than "I'm sorry you're hurting," "I care," or "I'm here to listen when you want to talk."

Responding to Loss

A person who has undergone a great loss needs to talk about what has happened and express feelings. In an attempt to process what has happened, this person may need to “relive” the events through talking about or thinking about them over and over again. Through such actions, over time, and with the caring of others, the survivor can come to accept the death or other loss and continue on. Though the person left behind may never forget or stop missing the beloved one, he or she can at least reach a sense of **closure**, *a coming to an end of the most intense parts of the grieving process.*

Grief Counseling

Sometimes people are so stressed by a sudden or traumatic loss that they feel paralyzed and stop coping altogether. They may have a **delayed grief response**, *a putting off of the most intense stages of grief.* They may deny the death or loss for a while until the shock wears off. They may even try to cover up their feelings by using chemicals or by assuring everyone that they are “just fine.” Such strategies, however, just delay the grieving process. Seeing a counselor who specializes in grief may prove helpful. In fact, talking with a counselor can be beneficial to anyone who has suffered a major loss.



▲ **People respond to loss in different ways.**

ACTIVITY *Name three different ways that people you know have responded to losing a loved one.*