

EARLY GRIEF MOURNING



SHOCK

The death of someone close to you comes as a tremendous shock. When someone dies unexpectedly this shock is intensified and when someone takes their own life, or dies in a violent way, the shock can be particularly acute. Shock is common during the days and weeks immediately following a death. Some experience it more severely and for longer than others.

NUMBNESS

Your mind only allows you to feel your loss slowly, and following the death of someone you have been close to, you may experience feelings of numbness. What has happened may seem unreal or dreamlike. The thought 'this can't really be happening' may recur. The numbness of early bereavement may itself be a source of distress and misunderstanding if one wonders, for example, why one cannot cry at the funeral. In fact, this numbness is only delaying emotional reactions and may be a help in getting through the practical arrangements. The 'protection' provided by shock gradually wears off and emotional pain begins.

DISBELIEF

It is natural to have difficulty believing what has happened. Where a death was untimely and sudden it is even harder to grasp that the loss is permanent and real. On one level it is possible to 'know' that a loved one has died. But on another, deeper level it may seem impossible to 'accept'. A large part of you will resist the knowledge that the person who has died is not going to be around any more. Confusion, panic and fear are common during this struggle between 'knowing' they have died and disbelief.

SEARCHING

Numbness and shock tend to give way to an overwhelming sense of loss. Many bereaved people find themselves instinctively 'searching' for their loved one, even though they know that they are dead. This may involve calling their name, talking to their photographs, dreaming they are back or looking out for them amongst people in the street. This denial of a painful reality is a natural part of mourning. Realising that a death has really happened and is irreversible takes some time.

"Denial is meeting your son on the street, seeing him from behind, the same shaped head, the identical droop of the shoulders, the swinging gait. Your leaping heart cries "Oh, it's Mitch!"

Some days, you'll walk into the house and 'feel' his presence in a room. You can 'see' that smile, 'hear' that laugh. A part of my denial was setting the table for him. Time and again, I'd set his place with all the others and then gasp with the realisation that he would never be coming home for dinner." ¹



ANGUISH AND PINING

The understanding that a loved one is really dead brings with it tremendous misery and sadness. As the loss begins to make itself felt, pining for the person who has died is common. Powerful and desperate longings – to see and touch them, to talk and be with them – may be felt. The intensity of emotions is often frightening and may leave the bereaved feeling devastated. Emotional pain is often accompanied by physical pain. It is common to go over and over what has happened, replaying things in your head or talking them through. The need to talk about a loved one, following their death, is part of the natural struggle to counteract their loss.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL STRESS

Losing someone close to you is a major source of stress. This stress may show itself in both physical and mental ways. Restlessness, sleeplessness and fatigue are common. You may also have bad dreams. Loss of memory and concentration are common. You may experience dizziness, palpitations, shakes, difficulty breathing, choking in the throat and chest. Intense emotional pain may be accompanied by physical pain. Sadness may feel like a pain within. Muscular tension may lead to headaches, neck and backaches. Loss of appetite, nausea and diarrhoea are also common and women's menstruation may be upset. Sexual interest may also be affected. The physical effects of shock usually pass with time.

"The most common phrase heard from the newly bereaved is "I feel like I'm going crazy."

*The pain and the accompanying emotions are so intense that it doesn't seem possible that a normal human being can experience them and still live. You may believe that you are going insane or at least on the verge of it but you are not. You are experiencing the physical and psychological reactions to deep loss."*²

¹ Bolton, I (1987) My Son, My Son. A guide to healing after death, loss or suicide. Atlanta: Bolton Press

² Gerner, M (1991) The grief of the newly bereaved. The Compassionate Friends Newsletter, summer edition. Reprinted with permission from Hill, K, Hawton, K, Malmber, A, Simkin, S (1997) Bereavement information pack : For those bereaved through suicide or other sudden death. London: The Royal College of Psychiatrists. ISBN 1 901242 08 0