

# UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

Nothing in life is more painful than the violent and senseless death of a loved one. People have grieved for as long as there has been life, but grief is still not fully understood.

In the past mental health professionals believed they had identified normal stages of grief following the death of a loved one that held true for all people without variation. They also believed those stages must be completed to get through the grieving process. Over the years researchers have found that there is NO universal law as represented by those stages of grief as to how one should or should not react to death. Each person grieves differently, yet not so differently that he or she cannot find fellowship in suffering with others.

Understanding more about the uniqueness of your grief will not change how you feel about your loved one. You may feel angrier than you have ever felt and sadder than you thought possible. You may do strange things. You may be afraid that you are “going crazy”.

## **How You Grieve Depends On A Number Of Things:**

- The way you learned to cope with stress in your life before this tragedy;
- The quality of the relationship you had with the person who died;
- The circumstances under which your loved one died;
- Your religious beliefs and ethnic customs; and
- The emotional support you have from your family and friends while grieving.

Seek the support and understanding of others who have gone through the same kind of trauma. You and your family can benefit from the assistance of others. Seek out counselors who understand the grief that follows your kind of loss and trauma. You do not have to handle this alone. The South Dakota Highway Crash Assistance Program will be able to help you identify grief support and assistance.

## **Children's Grief**

How do children experience the death of someone they love? Do they experience the sadness that adults feel? What can children understand about death? These are common questions caretakers ask when helping children face the death of a loved one. Children go through many different levels of understanding death as they grow older.

In times of grief, children need additional love, support and structure in their lives. This is often when the family is least able to help.

Death is difficult for adults to understand and explain, and the misconception that children are not really affected by grief has kept us from giving our children the help they need. Children who do not receive help with grieving learn to repress and deny their feelings.

Even if children repress their feelings, their grief eventually surfaces. They may get wiggly. Their grades may slip. They may pick at their food or retreat to their rooms. They may cry hysterically when someone accidentally bumps into them. Sometimes it is hard to recognize when children are grieving. Until fairly recently, the grieving process of children was not well understood.

Children do not necessarily “get over it” on their own. Neither do they always need lengthy psychiatric care. Grieving children have participated in grief support groups to help with their sadness, pain, and loneliness. It is helpful to meet others who are in similar situations. In support groups, children feel free to talk about their feelings and experiences.

In adulthood, children with unresolved grief often succumb to chemical dependency, have trouble with relationships and develop emotional disorders. Early intervention is the key to successful grief resolution. Children who are supported and encouraged soon become healthy and happy again.

## **Men's Grief**

Men often tell us that they suffer with lonely, suppressed grief. Men endure not only the psychological impact of losing a loved one, but may also fear losing their masculinity by openly expressing emotions.

We are taught to expect a man to be strong in a time of crisis, but the death of a loved one does not compare with other stressful emotions.

A man is entitled to express sorrow.

It's a natural response for men to experience the same feelings of grief at the death of a loved one that women do. Anger, guilt, moroseness, anxiety, and frustration are all very real to men. Men tell us they try to hide these feelings lest they be considered weak.

Men are reluctant to seek counseling and admit they need help in dealing with their feelings. Society seems to condition men to always be in control, self-reliant, competitive, and dominant, which is greatly unjust. Understanding the masculine stereotype is the first step in working through grief. *(Updated 2014 Dr. Fred Magnavito and Gayle Thom, SDHP VWC -from MOHP)*