



## Dealing with grief

By Andrew Lake

GRIEF is a subject that is seldom touched upon because it is one of the least pleasant human experiences. On the other hand, it touches all of us sooner or later so the more we understand grief the better we are able to cope with it. Furthermore, the grief experience for expatriates is often intensified by separation from friends and relatives, a sense of helplessness or guilt, and belonging to a culture, which has lost its traditional rituals and wisdom for accommodating grief.

### **REALITY 1: 'Grief is the natural response to any loss.'**

Losing anything: whether a job, a relationship, a pet, your health all entails a certain amount of grief. The intensity and length of the grief of course depend on the value placed on whatever was lost. The most severe grief most of us will experience is the death of someone we love.

### **REALITY 2: 'Grief is pain: emotional pain.'**

### **REALITY 3: 'Grief is a natural process.'**

When you are physically wounded there is a natural, God-given way in which your body heals. Medical science only assists this process. For instance if you receive a deep cut you will bleed; then the blood clots and a scab forms; then scar tissue forms and finally the scar fades. Each stage is necessary and there is a different kind of pain at each stage, with the pain eventually receding. The pain often comes in pulses. In the same way the pain of grief tends to come in waves. Just when you think you have come to terms with a loss the pain can return and for a while seem to overwhelm you.

### **REALITY 4: 'Grief moves through stages.'**

There are some typical phases in the grief experience. Here we are focusing on the death of a loved one.

**Numbness:** This is actually feeling nothing at all. It is the initial shock at the news of the death.

**Denial:** This is where our mind copes with the devastation by acting as if the death has not happened. Sometimes it is expressed by the expectation of seeing the person who has died "any minute now". Viewing the body or witnessing the burial or cremation often puts an end to the denial phase.

**Guilt:** It is very common for friends or relatives to seemingly grasp for things to feel guilty about how they in some way failed the person who died.

**Anger:** This is a normal reaction to both physical pain and the emotional pain of losing someone. Anger can be directed at the person who died, God, the funeral director, other relatives etc. often inappropriately.

**Depression:** This is often experienced as an emotional "flatness", and is usually the longest stage.

**Acceptance:** The final stage of the process is when a kind of equilibrium is reached. The ache is gone from the memory of the person who has died and remembering may even evoke positive feelings like gratitude for the person's life.

**Other considerations:** Grieving occupies a lot of mental and emotional energy, often at a subconscious level. The grieving person is unconsciously preoccupied and this can lead to insomnia, being accident-prone, and lapses in concentration among other things.



**REALITY 5: 'Every grief is different.'**

There is a whole range of variables including the nature of the relationship with the person who died, the circumstances of the person's death, the age of the person who died and whether there had been any opportunity to prepare for the person's death. (Further, young children grieve differently to others, often experiencing a "delayed grief" after a period of seeming to be unaffected by the death.) Therefore everyone needs to be allowed to grieve in their own way at their own pace.

**REALITY 6: 'There are helpful and unhelpful ways to approach grief.'**

The worst thing to do is to repress the pain and pretend that the grieving process is completed at the funeral. The best approach is to face up the pain and to seek to identify whatever emotion is being experienced. This is difficult because we tend not to want to confront painful feelings because we see them as negative or ugly and perhaps we are afraid they may destroy us. Sharing what you are going through with a friend and writing a journal can be helpful. Comfort and strength are found in religious faith .

**REALITY 7: 'There are two types of grief: uncomplicated and complicated.'**

Just as some physical wounds can heal simply while with other wounds complications develop, so some griefs develop complications. A symptom of "complicated grief" is being stuck at a particular stage of grief for an undue amount of time. This is not easy to judge, but if after let's say three years a person finds they are constantly besieged with regrets or obsessed with anger or are overwhelmed with sadness or refuse to mention the loss or are haunted by flashbacks then they may need help to work through the issue so they can complete the grief process. Often a friend who is a good listener and can be trusted and who is capable of withholding advice is all that is needed. A counselor or minister has specialized skills that can help.

**REALITY 8: 'There is a positive side to grief.'**

"No pain... no gain!" is not a helpful thing to say to someone going through the devastation of grief. But there is truth in it. When grief is confronted with courage and realism and patience and is properly worked through then we grow in wisdom and in our capacity to love. Grief is a normal part of our humanity. The only sure way of avoiding the grief of losing people we love is to avoid relationships. This attitude is epitomized in the old Simon and Garfunkel song "I am a Rock, I am an Island". The cost though is a diminished humanity and emotional impoverishment. Grief is the supreme "school for the soul".