



## **Handling Loss – Five Steps To Help Yourself & Others**

People often tell me that they don't know what to say when someone experiences a loss. I explain that often times the person experiencing the loss simply needs to talk. You don't need to say anything; just be there to listen and support the individual. However, most people are still uncomfortable with helping family members, friends, and colleagues cope with loss. This article provides information on understanding loss and tips to be in a better position to help yourself and others work through their own loss.

1. Recognize that we all experience loss and grief at some point in our lives. You might have lost a child, parent, significant other, or pet; went through a divorce; suffered a serious illness, acquired a disability, or became an addict; been burglarized, assaulted, or raped; or suffered some other type of loss. Remember how that loss made you feel and how you wanted people to treat or respond to you as you worked through your loss. The memory of your experience, and what worked or didn't work for you, can aid you in helping others to work through their own loss.

2. Try not to compare your loss to another person's loss, as you don't know how it feels to be in their shoes. Even though their loss may not seem as significant as the loss you have experienced, that doesn't make their loss any less in their eyes. They need to process their personal loss in a way that works best for them. It may not be the same process that you used or are using, so be careful to avoid comparisons and, hence, judgment.

3. Understand the different stages of loss or grief. Helen Kubler Ross wrote a book titled "On Death and Dying." This book outlines five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. An individual who is dying or has experienced a significant loss is most likely to experience most, if not all, of these stages. Also, there is no set order in which people experience the different stages of grief. The important thing is to understand the emotions and behaviors associated with each stage, which are as follows:

a. Denial - this is when the person denies or rejects the actual loss. To provide an example of this stage and the following four stages, we will use an individual who has been diagnosed with a terminal cancer. In this stage, the individual may deny the seriousness of the situation. They might make statements, such as "It can't be that serious... I feel fine" or "I'm sure they made a mistake in the diagnosis." If someone is in denial, acknowledge that this is one of the stages of grief/loss. Allow the individual to work through that stage, unless they get stuck and intervention is needed.

b. Anger - this is when the person moves beyond denial and becomes angry with or at the loss. For example, the individual with terminal cancer may make statements, such as "Why is this happening to me?" or "This isn't fair!" Being angry at something in which you feel you have no control is common among people. People often need to vent to get it out of their system. Allow the individual sufficient time and space to vent and work through their anger.

c. Bargaining - this is when the person experiences a surge of hope and begins to make bargains. For example, the individual with cancer may make statements, such as "I will do anything to live a few more years" or "I will eat healthy meals and exercise daily, anything to stay alive!" We have all heard people make bargains when faced with a life-threatening situation; it is perfectly normal.

d. Depression - this is when the person is no longer in denial, has worked through their anger, and realizes the futility of bargaining. They sink into a depressed state, not wanting to be around family members or friends. This may be difficult for the individual's loved ones, but it is a stage that people need to go through.

e. Acceptance - this is when the person understands the seriousness of their situation and is prepared to accept it as best as they can. They may make statements, such as "Don't worry, it will be okay" or "I'm going to die so let me get my papers in order." There is not much you can say at this point. It is best to simply support the individual in whatever manner they need.

4. Even if you have not experienced the exact loss that someone is going through, you can still be there to listen to and support them. They are not looking for advice; they are looking for a friend. As they speak, acknowledge their words and emotions by nodding your head and/or making an occasional comment, such as "I can't understand what you're going through, but it must be tough..." or "It's okay to get it all out; I'm here for you." People need to feel that they are being heard; it is the most important gift you can give them.

5. If an individual seems to be stuck in the grief cycle, you might suggest that they seek counseling or join a support group, where they can be with others who have experienced a similar loss. You could also share literature or additional resources that might be helpful. Although they may not accept any of your suggestions, at least you have planted the seed for them to know where to go and who to talk to should they need additional support in the future. That may be the best you can do at that time.

Dealing with grief and loss can be tough but if you use your personal experience, avoid making comparisons as to when and how to deal with loss, understand and recognize the five stages of grief/loss, are able to support an individual without giving advice, and share resources with individuals who might need additional support, you will be in a better position to help yourself and others who are experiencing loss.

