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The Later Years – Coping With Loss
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THE LATER YEARS of LIFE

3.

Coping with Loss

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Life is a series of beginnings and endings—economically, physically, socially and emotionally. Sometimes, these changes are welcome ones, adding variety and enrichment to our lives. Sometimes, however, they may be painful, particularly where change results from loss. Here, we will be looking at the natural processes connected with loss and some suggestions for helping ourselves and others to cope effectively when loss occurs.

Loss Is Inevitable

As we move through life, and especially in the later years, we should expect to experience loss. It may be a physiological one due to advancing years—a loss of eyesight, mobility, or physical tone. It may be the loss of a friend, parent or mate because of sickness or death. It may even be a sense of our own adequacy or competency because of a loss of memory...or a change in marital status or work roles.

Many of our losses will be irreversible, and it is difficult to say which of them will be most deeply felt. That always depends upon the degree of our personal investment—economic, time, and emotional. Our adjustment following a loss will also depend upon that investment, as well as upon our ability to accept loss as natural change, painful as it may be.

The Season of Grief

Often comforting are the frequently quoted words, "This, too, shall pass." They speak to the universality of loss, which we all must face, as well as to the measured truth that time truly does diminish the pain of loss.

There are certain stages that are commonly experienced after loss. Re-adjustment depends upon the grieving person's progress through the entire cycle. Success in moving through the stages (and length of time and intensity at each stage) depends upon the initial disruption the loss has caused. Also important will be the individual's ability to confront a crisis. The stages characteristic of grief or loss include the following:

1. Shock or Protest. The individual may experience physical symptoms such as disturbed sleep-

ing or eating patterns, irregularity in breathing, or other body functions, accompanied by weakness, weeping, etc. Grief is often turned inward.

2. Disorganization and/or Despair. Physiological upset may continue. Grief begins to turn outward, however, and may be expressed by restlessness, confusion, and an inability to make decisions. Caution should be taken in making any drastic changes during this time.

3. Emotional Reaction. This stage may include a wide range of emotional responses, including anger, great sadness, detachment, apathy, etc. There may be unconscious withdrawal from friends or even hostility.

Guilt may be expressed: "Why didn't...If only...We should have..."

4. Loss and Loneliness. A true sense of what has been lost is experienced as well as a sense of loneliness. There is recognition of a void to be filled. One's lifestyle, as related to the loss, is viewed critically.

5. Relief and Recovery. Acceptance of the loss takes place. Equilibrium begins to return. There are brief-to-extended periods of relief where attention is no longer wholly directed toward the loss. Intense feelings of sadness lift, and physical and emotional states may begin to approximate those normal to the individual before the loss occurred. Recovery can be accelerated when there is a conscious and optimistic effort to rebuild—whether the effort requires rehabilitation, new goals, or the development of new friendships and roles.

**As we move
through life...
we should expect
to experience loss.**

By Anne K. Soderman
Department of Family
and Child Ecology
In cooperation with
the Human Development
Impact Committee

Helping Others Deal With Grief

Understand that behavior of those suffering loss may be emotionally intense, disorganized, and "out of character" for a period. Work at being tolerant of that behavior rather than judgmental. Psychological stress and anxiety may be somewhat relieved by a reminder that loss sometimes makes one feel ineffective or causes one to lose perspective for a time. These feelings are usually only temporary. If they are intense and persist, however, professional support may be required.

Recognize that there has been a loss. Don't ignore it; express your own feelings about the loss and actively listen to others expressing their grief.

Attend memorial and/or funeral services. These services can often serve to punctuate the reality of the loss so there is acceptance and an attitude afterwards that says, "It was painful, but it is over. It is time to look toward the future."

Avoid scapegoating or blaming. Try to assume a positive outlook.

Those who have sustained loss should get out of the house every day, maintain contact with other people, and continue to participate in appropriate social activities.

Express your understanding of others' loss in a tangible manner, if possible—by a note, a small gift, or a thoughtful act. Look for opportunities to be genuinely helpful and then act rather than leaving it at, "If there's anything I can do, let me know..."

Continue to express your interest and support through the entire grief cycle, not just after the initial shock of the loss. Frequent written messages, phone calls, and invitations for light meals or just coffee are all helpful in restoring a steady state.

Avoid giving false reassurances about the future or making offers that you don't intend to follow up. Concentrate on possible, rather than unlikely alternatives related to the loss.

References and Recommended Reading

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Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. **On Death and Dying.** New York: MacMillan, 1969.

Sarah Morris. **Grief and How to Live With It.** New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1972.

Understanding Grief. Cooperative Extension Service. Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas.

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