

Vassar College Counseling Service

Grieving an Unexpected Loss

The unexpected loss of a loved one is often shocking and painful. The grief that ensues can be intense, complex and long term. Grief does not follow a linear path and does not always move in a forward direction. There is no time frame for grief. Grief work is an extremely individual and unique process; each person will experience it in his/her own way and at his/her own pace. However, many bereaved persons share common feelings and reactions including:

Shock	Denial	Pain
Guilt	Anger	Shame
Despair	Disbelief	Hopelessness
Stress	Sadness	Numbness
Rejection	Loneliness	Abandonment
Confusion	Self-blame	Anxiety
Helplessness	Depression	

These feelings are normal reactions and the expression of them is a natural part of grieving.

How You Can Help Yourself:

- Gather information. Develop an understanding of the grieving process. Talk with members of bereavement support organizations and/or clergy. Use bibliographic resources to learn more.
- Participate in rituals/say goodbye. Ceremonies and rituals help us to make the "unreal" more real and to move toward accepting and integrating our loss. Attend the funeral or memorial service. Mark important anniversaries in ways that are meaningful to you.
- Care for yourself physically. Get adequate rest, nutrition and exercise.
- Care for yourself emotionally. Give yourself permission to grieve. Allow quiet time alone to reflect and to explore and experience your thoughts and feelings. Allow time to heal without setting unrealistic goals and deadlines. Resist/delay making major decisions/changes in your life.
- Express your feelings. Allow opportunities to express the full range of your emotions. This includes sadness, but also perhaps, fear, guilt, anger, resentment, and relief. Avoiding emotions through excessive activity, denial, or abuse of substances complicates and prolongs the pain of loss.
- Seek support. Gathering and using social support is essential. Support from others reduces isolation and loneliness and increases one's sense of security, safety and attachment. Talk to friends openly about your loss. If religion or spirituality is important to you, talk with a member of the clergy or a spiritual advisor. Consider joining a support group for people who have experienced a similar loss.
- Consider seeking professional help. The Vassar College Counseling Service offers individual counseling and workshops on grief. We can also refer you to resources in the community. For more information, call us at x5700 or stop by Metcalf, between the hours of 9-5, Monday through Friday.

How you can help a friend

- Talk openly to the bereaved person about his/her loss and feelings. Don't try to offer false cheer or minimize the loss.
- Be available. Your presence and companionship are important.
- Listen/be patient. Listening is an often overlooked gift. Allow the bereaved person to vent feelings. Don't judge the person's thoughts or feelings. Don't feel you need to offer advice. Listening itself is very powerful.
- Encourage self care. Encourage your friend to care of him or herself physically, emotionally, and socially. Encourage your friend to seek support and/or professional help, if appropriate.
- Accept your own limitations. Accept that you cannot eliminate the pain your friend is experiencing. Grief is a natural, expected response to loss and each person must work through it in his/her own way and at his/her own pace. Be supportive, but care for yourself too.