



# Good Grief

Leilani Mitchell gives a personal view on the emotions involved in losing a loved one.



Grief is something we all go through at some point in our lives. At 42, I have had more than my fair share – my brother died when I was 20, my sister died when I was 34 and my father died last year. I know about grief from the inside.

One of the things that has been useful to me in my own grieving process is having some understanding of what is going on for me. We can loosely look at loss in two ways – simple and complicated.

Simple loss is when the loss is expected and timely. For example my father was 96, he had been ill for two years. He had had a long, good life and I had time to prepare and say what I wanted to say to him.

Complicated loss is when it is shocking, has unusual circumstances and /or is out of time. For me having a sibling die was wrong, although my brother had been ill for some time, it was not right – he was too young to die. When my sister then died it was hugely shocking to me that this could happen again. These were both complicated grieving processes for me.

Often what happens when someone dies, especially if it is sudden, is that we are left with unfinished business. This can get in the way of our grieving. There are many grieving rituals that can be useful in letting go and completing unfinished business. An example of this is that you could write a letter to the person saying all the things you want to tell them.

Frequently in the grieving process you experience feelings and then feel bad about feeling them. For example we may feel angry with the person who has died and then feel bad or guilty about feeling that way. One thing that has been useful to me is to understand that I am going to feel a whole range of things and all of those things are normal – thus avoiding piling guilt on top of my grief.

A well-known model of grief was developed by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in her book *Death and Dying* (1969). She talks about different stages of grief, which are:

**Denial** – shock, numbness, it's not real. We may feel nothing in this phase.

**Anger** – this could be focused on anyone: us, the person who has died, doctors, the world.

**Bargaining** – this is a phase of 'if only's, eg. 'if I am a really good person from now on please make this person not be dead'.

**Depression** – where we feel very low and despairing, we may not want contact with others.

**Acceptance** – true acceptance of the reality of the situation, the person has died and is not coming back.

These stages are not necessarily sequential and can vary in the amount of time they take. This model can be useful in terms of understanding that what you are feeling is normal and will change over time. Grief takes time and people can get stuck at certain stages; extra support through grief counselling can help.

People experience the grief process quite differently. This will be influenced by personality type, level of relationship, type of loss (complicated or simple) and the willingness to let go and just feel.

Whenever we experience loss it triggers us back to previous losses. Some people have a strong physical response. It's especially important you take care of your physical and emotional health at these times.

Grief is something we all face. The more you allow yourself just to feel and express what you feel, whatever those emotions may be, and get support, the sooner the pain will lessen. If you are grieving you are in a process and you will come out the other side.

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