

Loss & Change: For the LGBTQQ Community

People facing grief after the death or during the illness of family member, spouse, child, or friend may have multiple issues and layers of loss to survive. Many times, we are not given permission to grieve as individuals or as a community. If you are LGBTQQ, the grief experience can be even more difficult, due to the stigma around these issues of lifestyle.

The definition of grief is the natural, human response to any change or loss in our lives. This is not limited to death or serious illness. We live in a death and grief denying society in America. We are given a three-day bereavement leave in most corporate environments for the death of immediate family. Your lover/partner may not be considered immediate family. In our school system, our children receive one- day official bereavement time.

Other issues include **breakup of a relationship, entering into a new relationship, death of a pet, internal transition process, recovery processes, identity issues, spiritual issues, family dynamics** around any loss or change issue or traditions (e.g.: holidays), **work issues, human rights issues, and the multiple deaths of friends and loved ones.**

In the hospital setting, the stigma can be more acute, especially in the **serious illness of a loved one**, where as family and friends, you are advocating for the best treatment possible, in the midst of your own grief process. Decisions maybe made by healthcare professionals or family of origin without consultation with you. Your rights to see, visit, take care of your loved one may be taken away. That is why it is necessary to establish a **Advanced Health Care Directive**, a legally binding document in California, and establish who you wish to be the primary person to make medical decisions in the event you are unable to do so.

What can you do?

•**Acknowledge the loss** and the impact of the grief process. Honor your grief. It is a reflection of the depth of your love and caring. Don't minimize or negate your grief. The first step is to accept that you are a normal person living through an abnormally painful time. You are entitled to your feelings. Much of the grief response is very physical. Your body can react in many different ways. Grief also impacts us on a daily basis, emotionally, mentally, socially and spiritually.

•Your journey through grief is **very individual**, even though the feelings associated with grief are very universal. Don't let anyone tell you how to grieve or how to survive. Grief is something one never truly gets over. You simply **build a new normal**, piece by piece at a time.

•**Express your feelings** through talking, writing, talking into a tape recorder or physical movement. Writing a letter to the person you are missing or have unfinished business with is an excellent way to release bottled up emotions.

- Talk with others who are sympathetic** and/or who have experienced similar losses. It helps to know you're not alone. This is especially important for LGBTQQ persons, as the isolation in grief can intensify the pain.
- Mobilize support people** when you have to cope with family, the healthcare profession and other people and institutions who do not acknowledge your place in the pain.
- Create as much meaning and ceremony** as you can to bring closure to the event of loss. If you are breaking up, have a ceremony of separation. If you are facing an **anniversary date**, light a candle by a photograph of your loved one. Do something active that will acknowledge your pain and help you to transform it into the remembering of the love.
- Realize that **grief can take a long time to heal** - and that we can stockpile multiple grief. If we did not have the opportunity to work with past traumas/losses, the **present grief can trigger old wounds**.
- Remember, we only have to deal with **one moment, one issue, one feeling at a time**. That makes grief a little more manageable. Because of the complicated nature of many grief situations, it is especially important to prioritize, according to what hurts the most or what is most difficult, *right now*.
- The next step is to focus on **what you most need to do right now**, to deal with the situation in the most affirming way possible. At times, it can be difficult to reach out for support. This is a time to be gentle with your individual needs and realize that **strength is not measured in our ability to deal with it alone, but rather in risking asking for help**.
- You do not have to change your coping skills**, if they work and are good for you. On the other hand, grief affords us the opportunity to examine what is not working and try a new way of taking care of ourselves. There can be a deep fear that once the doorway to emotions is opened, the floodgates will not hold. **Ultimately, we have the control over how much we deal with at any given time**. You have the power to monitor how deeply you go. Create the safe environment you need to deal with the spectrum of feelings in your own time and own way.
- Utilize resources that are positive towards your experience of grief** and give you the emotional, spiritual and physical support you deserve. Sensitive therapists, support groups and friends can make the difference in your healing. **The Centre for Living with Dying** is here for you - to provide support for as long as the need exists. Call us at **408.278.2515**.

The Centre for Living with Dying
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408.278.2512