

COPING WITH GRIEF AND LOSS

By Ellen Harris, LMHC, CEAP

During the recent disaster in Haiti, the world has been inundated with vivid images of grief and loss. Thoughts of grief bring an array of hurtful feelings: agony, heartache, misery, regret, despair, and anguish. Grief hurts. It's a part of life. And, we all experience it.

We traditionally think of grief as the extreme sadness we feel when someone we love dies, but we grieve over other losses - dreams – relationships – health- financial stability. Often these events are due to circumstances far beyond our control. What can we do about it?

Grief is our natural response to loss. It can manifest in feelings and behaviors such as anger, guilt, sadness, irritability, isolation, fear, and physical ailments. If life circumstances change in an unfavorable way, it's OK to feel loss. Understanding the grief process helps us cope.

Stages of grief include denial ("This can't be happening"), anger ("Why did this happen?"), bargaining ("If I get through this, things will be different..."), depression ("I feel hopeless and sad all the time..."), and ultimately, acceptance ("I am at peace..."). These stages are not clearly defined. While trying to wrap our minds around the shock of loss, we bounce from stage to stage.

There are important ways to enhance your ability to cope. Be kind to yourself. We all react to grief and loss differently. There is no right or wrong way to navigate the process. Face your feelings. Notice if you are worrying excessively. Be aware of isolating yourself – too much time alone can prolong grief and lead to depression. Pay attention to self care – a healthy lifestyle is an integral part of good coping skills. Reach out to help others. Talk to someone – family, friends, support group, or therapist. Turn to spirituality.

Grief can force us to look inward and evaluate the meaning in life. It's natural to attempt to understand, although there are often no explanations for sad things that happen.

If you or a loved one is experiencing grief, know that help is available. Talk to friends, visit a support group, or call a therapist for help.

For more information, call Ellen Harris, LMHC at 239-404-0862.