COMMON MYTHS ABOUT GRIEF AND LOSS

- **Myth: Grief and mourning are the same experience.** Grief is an internal experience, the thoughts and feelings that occur after a significant loss. Mourning is the outward expression of that grief through language and/or behavior. It is mourning, not just grieving, that ultimately leads to healing.

- **Myth: A child's grief and mourning are short in duration.** Grief and mourning constitute a process not an event. Sometimes children don't "show" strong feelings about a loss, particularly initially; sometimes they want to go out and play soon after learning about a loss. Children work out feelings best through play. This does not mean that they are not mourning or that they have "gotten over it" quickly, but may rather be the only way they have of protecting themselves from the hurt and pain they do feel. Sometimes children don't "show" their feelings because that is what is modeled by the adults around them; sometimes they control their feelings so as not to upset those around them.

- **Myth: Grief and mourning proceed in a predictable and orderly stage-like progression.** No two children are alike in their experience and expression of grief and mourning, and there is no prescribed pattern of "normal" grief and mourning. Not even children in the same age group, with all their developmental similarities, will grieve and mourn the same way. Rather than assume we "know" what a child will (or worse yet "should") experience, we need to allow and encourage the child to teach us about his/her grief, about the variety of unique thoughts, feelings, and behaviors the child experiences as part of the healing process.

- **Myth: Infants and toddlers are too young to grieve.** Any child old enough to love is old enough to grieve and mourn. While infants and toddlers cannot use words to "teach us about their grief," we can learn much from their behaviors if we pay attention. Regressive behavior, sleep disturbances, and explosive emotions are all ways that pre-verbal and early-verbal children express their grief.

- **Myth: Children are not affected by the grief and mourning of the adults who surround them.** The most important factor in enabling and encouraging children to move through mourning toward healing is the behavior of the significant adults around them. In some cases, adults deny or conceal their own grief and mourning, teaching children to do the same and leaving them to create their own explanations, often blaming themselves, for the unhappiness and tension they feel around them. In other cases, the adults may be so distraught that they are emotionally unavailable to the children, leaving them without a much-needed caring adult support system.

- **Myth: Childhood bereavement leads to adult maladjustment.** While the trauma of childhood bereavement is significant, it does not preclude positive adjustment. Healing or "reconciliation" is greatly facilitated by family and social environments which allow and help children to do the "work" of mourning.

- **Myth: Children are better off if they don't attend funerals.** A funeral is a significant event which allows and encourages both adults and children to comfort each other, to openly mourn, and to honor the life of the person who has died. Children should have the same opportunity as adults (indeed, should be encouraged, but never forced) to attend and participate in this important ritual in the company of caring adults.

- **Myth: Tears are an expression of "weakness" and should be discouraged. Adults should avoid topics that might make children cry.** Because children's crying often makes adults feel helpless, there is a tendency for them to urge children to "be strong" and to avoid situations or topics that might elicit children's tears. Crying is nature's way of releasing internal tension and allows both children and adults to communicate a need to be comforted. Rather than a sign of weakness, tears are a sign of the on-going "work" of mourning, and this natural expression of grief should not be thwarted or discouraged. Adults who can share their own tears provide healthy models for this process.

- **Myth: Adults should be able to make bereaved children understand about religion and death.**

http://staff.edmonds.wednet.edu/psych/myths.html 3/29/2012
Frequently Asked Questions about Grief

How long will this go on?
The journey through grief is a highly individual experience. Rather than focus on a timeline, it is perhaps more helpful to focus on its intensity and duration. Initially grief is overwhelming and people can feel out of control. With time people find they have more ability to choose when they access memories and emotions. The intensity of grief is related to the degree of attachment to the person, the type of relationship and other factors such as understanding and social support, personality and specific details of the bereavement.

Am I going mad?
It will certainly feel like it at times. Particularly if individuals need to grieve is out of step with social and cultural expectations. Grief affects people physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. People may be required to make adjustments to their lives eg, learning new skills, at a time when they feel least able to do so. Validation and permission to grieve are powerful comfort to a bereaved person’s experience.

Do I have the right to inflict this on others? What can I expect of them and they of me?
Some will feel intensely uncomfortable with the emotion and the pain of the bereaved to the point of feeling helpless. The anxiety this causes may mean that the bereaved person will be avoided, further increasing the possibility of them feeling isolated. Others may wish to take over details to protect the bereaved person from further pain. It is important that the grieving person is assertive about their needs and wishes, and it is helpful if they communicate with family, friends, and colleagues rather than leave them guessing about what would be useful and comforting. *Never underestimate the power of listening and being a warm presence.* There are no magic words or actions. Trust your ability to care taking into account your relationship with the person you are trying to help.

Is there a right way and a wrong way of coping with grief?
People are individuals with personalities and life experiences which influence the way in which they deal with grief. People's style of grieving must be respected and in this sense there is no right or wrong way of coping. However it is generally believed that the amount of support people receive can ameliorate some of the impact of grief and facilitate recovery. People often have an awareness about what they need to do to feel better but feel inhibited or judged and don't act on their inclinations. Talking about what is happening, what they are going through, expressing emotion and existing in a supportive and accepting climate is generally helpful. Cultural factors may impact on a persons feelings of a "right" or "wrong way" to cope.

How do I know I need help?
Reassurance from others who have also experienced grief and an understanding of what people have commonly undergone when grieving can be a helpful yardstick. Any continued fears or anxieties about your wellbeing or thoughts of self-harm should be addressed by seeking help. Prolonged intense emotion or obsessive thought or behavior that make functioning difficult may also require help.
Stages of grief
Grief does not follow a linear pattern. It is more like a roller coaster, two steps forward and one step back. Ultimately people manage to integrate the experience to the point of having a new life arising from the old. The loss remains and is always remembered, but the intensity is no longer disabling or disorganizing.

Much of grieving is about expressing emotion—some may be unfamiliar, and unacceptable to self or others, feelings like rage, guilt, remorse. Finding a safe place and an accepting person for support to work through all the effects of bereavement is important. The amount of support available from family and friends may be limited if they too are grieving. Misunderstandings can arise when people are at different points within the grief experience. External supports may then become a vital factor in surviving and continuing on. It is important to know that you can survive the experience and that the new life that eventually comes about may have very positive effects despite the difficulty of arriving at this point.

Does counseling help?
It is important to say that grief is a normal response to loss and that people frequently get through with the loving support of family and friends. However for a variety of reasons it may be necessary to seek professional help in the form of counseling. Counseling may initially intensify painful feelings as the external distractions are removed and the client is able to focus on their experiences and explore them fully. People who are grieving may need to talk about their story over and over again and are often concerned about the ‘wear out’ factor on family and friends, especially if details are very distressing. Equally they may find that others have unrealistic expectations of their recovery or experiences. Where people have to continue on in roles as parents or caregivers it may provide valuable time-out for their own need to grieve and receive support. A supportive, safe and accepting environment and time set aside regularly can make a great difference. It may provide comfort and hope at a time of great confusion and crisis.

Twelve Ways to Help the Bereaved:

- By being there
- By tolerating silences
- By listening in an accepting and non-judgmental way
- Avoid the use of clichés such as "Think of all the good times", "You can always have another child", etc.
- By encouraging them to talk about the deceased
- Be practical in your offer of support by minding children or cooking
- By mentioning the dead persons name
- Accept that tears are normal and healthy
- Don’t try to fill in conversations with a lot of outside news
- Remember that grief may take many years to work through
- Acknowledge birthdays, death dates, anniversaries, etc.
- By accepting that you cannot make them feel better

Article courtesy of:
The Centre for Grief Education
HELPING TO SURVIVE A LOSS

Death is never easy to deal with but it is a part of life. The loss of a loved one is one of life's most stressful events. Because of the pain associated with someone dying, it is important that you know how to confront and acknowledge the intense emotions of those times.

All people go through a process of grief when someone close dies. Grief is a natural, healthy response to a significant loss in our lives. Although the grief process is never the same in everyone, certain feelings are common. These feelings include shock, denial, anger, guilt, depression, loneliness, and hopefully, acceptance. Usually people can get through the grieving process alone, but sometimes there is a need for professional help to understand the "facts of death".

The period of bereavement is not an easy one for anybody. Family members need to be consoled and helped through the traumatic ordeal. Here are some things you can do to help the grieving process go smoother for those closest to the deceased.

1. **Listen.** Allow the grieving person to talk openly about the person who has died, the death, etc. if that is what they want to do. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. While some people are very talkative, others are quiet and introspective. Remember, it's more important for you to be a help than a hinderance during this time.

2. **Be present.** Your mere presence can sometimes be of more comfort than you realize. Giving a hug or holding hands can be a tremendous source of support. If you can't be with the grieving person, call, write or send flowers or a sympathy card. These and similar gestures will be appreciated.

3. **Be patient.** The grieving process takes time. Each phase must be addressed. Don't try to rush the person through it or try to protect them from their loss. As hard as it may be to watch, the pain and the waiting are necessary to their recovery from their loss.

4. **Offer sincere support.** Be certain you are of comfort to the grieving person. Supportive remarks would include "It takes time", "I know you'll miss your loved one and your life together, I will too" and "She was such a good person". Comments like "It was his time to go" or "You'll get over it with time" probably won't comfort the grieving person.

5. **Be useful.** You can take some of the pressure off of the grieving person by taking care of household chores, assisting with thank-you notes, helping with meals and answering the telephone. Someone who is experiencing the death of a loved one may not feel like attending to these tedious activities.

If you would like more information on helping someone deal with their grief, or you need help in getting through your own grief process, call (810) 257-3740. A professional counselor is there to listen and help.
Helping Children Recover From Loss

Sometimes during a family crisis, children may get lost in the shuffle and confusion. Unfortunately, they are left to deal with a significant loss alone which can be damaging to the child. Adults and children need help coping with a loss whether it's a death, a move to a new neighborhood or school, divorce, etc., but children are especially vulnerable to the effects of such a loss. A child may have experienced a loss at school like a friend who has moved away or a favorite teacher who has been replaced.

While most parents would like to shield their child from the details of a crisis of any kind, it is much better to be open and honest with him or her. It is important that the loss is explained in terms the child can understand.

You can help your child through a crisis by:

1) **Talking with him or her.** Give correct and simple information. Allow him or her to tell their stories of what has happened.

2. **Listening** with a neutral perspective to what he or she is saying and how he or she says it. This helps you and your child clarify feelings. You may say, "How does (the loss) make you feel?" to elicit feedback from your child.

3) **Reassuring him or her.** Help him or her feel safe and secure. You may need to repeat this reassurance many times: "We are together and we will take care of YOU."

4) **Providing physical comfort.** Touching, hugging and contact is important during this time.

5) **Observing your child at play.** Listen to what is said and how the child plays. Frequently, children express feelings of fear or anger while playing with toys or friends.

6) **Providing play which relieves tension.** Allow the child to play with playdough, paint, pillows, balloons or balls.

7) **Allowing your child to grieve and mourn.** Giving a child the opportunity to express feelings is important to good emotional growth. Telling a child to "grow up" or "be a big boy/girl" can be detrimental to a child's emotional recovery.

You can help your child the most through a crisis situation by including him or her in the grief and recovery process. Children are very perceptive and may feel that they are being left out because the crisis was their fault. If you sense your child feels guilty or responsible for the loss, you may need to relieve them of their burden. You may have to say, 'Maybe what you said or did wasn't nice, but you are not responsible for this.' A loss is more difficult to deal with when there is regret or guilt.

This is a time for increased sensitivity to your child's feelings. You may want to leave a night light on for your child or rock him or her to sleep. It may also help to be a little lenient with household rules.

If your family has recently experienced a crisis or a significant loss and you need help dealing with your feelings and those of your children, call (313) 257-3740. A professional counselor is there to help in any way possible.

**GENESEE COUNTY COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH PREVENTION & INFORMATION SERVICES**
420 W. Fifth Avenue * Flint Michigan * (810) 257-3705
HELPING KIDS TO COPE WITH GRIEF

A lot of people have very wrong ideas when it comes to helping children to deal with grief. Sometimes these misconceptions can prove to be more damaging than helpful. Listed here are several myths commonly associated with grief. We have offered some alternatives to help you if you are helping a child or young person who is grieving or if you have lost a loved one.

Myth #1: Tears are a sign of weakness.
   Tears are a very normal way to release the intense emotions a grieving person is feeling inside. Encouraging a child to withhold his or her feelings is encouraging potential emotional problems.

Myth #2: It is best to avoid talking about the death with or around a child who is grieving.
   People who are grieving the loss of a loved one usually are grateful to those who keep memories alive, and who are not afraid to talk about the death. Depending on the age of a child, he or she may want to know more about the deceased person or details about the death.

Myth #3: Once you're over the grief process, you have stopped caring about a loved one.
   Recovering from a significant loss is healthy. The love a youngster has developed for someone close who has died will last long after they have gotten over the shock of the death.

Myth #4: Children should be sheltered from grief.
   Kids need to vent their feelings about the loss of a loved one just like adults. According to their age, adults need to explain the loss and the grieving process to children. This will help them to better understand the feelings they are experiencing that they are not accustomed to.

Myth #5: The grieving process is the same for everyone and you can identify each phase in order.
   The grieving process is a very complicated one and differs from person to person. You will not see a grieving child changing neatly from one defined stage to another. In fact, it is common for people to drift back and forth between the stages of anger, denial, and acceptance.

The loss of a loved one, whether it is a parent, grandparent, sibling or other relative, can be especially difficult for children. Death is one of life's most stressful events and is a period which needs to be handled with extreme sensitivity. If you know a young person who is grieving or you need some help getting through this tough time yourself, call (313) 257-3740. A professional counselor is always there to help.

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Finding Hope Beyond Grief

You have experienced a loss whether it be a loss of a relative or a friend; or as a rape, assault, violence victim; or in moving or changing jobs. There are many situations which can lead to loss and it is important to note there are many kinds of loss. A loss of a friendship, loss of dignity, loss of independence, or a loss of trust are just a few examples.

Understanding loss is a healing process which you need to work toward. The time it takes for an emotional wound to heal varies from person to person. The healing process is best done openly and honestly. The following suggestions may help ease recovery for adults and teens.

1. Let your friends and family help you. Take advantage of their offers to help you. It makes them feel good, they are doing something for you.
2. Share your feelings. If you are feeling overwhelmed, talk it over with a trained counselor or another bereaved person. Objectivity is often helpful.
3. Do not use alcohol and drugs. The work of mourning does not proceed while you are numb. It resumes when sedation wears off.
4. Work on acknowledging reality. Tell yourself, "it happened. I have to deal with it".
5. Anger is natural. Try to keep it in focus.
6. Try to replace "why" with "what"? Stop looking for causes and begin to think about next steps. Ask, "What do I do now?" The answer may be "nothing" and that's normal. One day at a time is all you can manage.
7. Begin your what with small questions. "What should I wear?", for example.
8. Pain is part of the process, accept it. It will be bad, but pain is a by-product of the healing process - like the pain you feel when a broken bone is mending.
9. Give yourself quiet time. You will need time alone to let your mind run free, let it roam. Don't fight. This will help you heal.
10. Adjust to your own time frame. You cannot rush the grieving process. Listen to your innerself and your feelings.
11. Remind yourself of your worth. Take good care of yourself emotionally physically, socially and mentally.
12. Be ready for relapses. You will wake up one day feeling good and think it is over. It is not. Later that day you may feel a vivid reminder. Do not despair. Healing takes time. Be patient with yourself.

For the person experiencing loss, life has changed significantly and there are many adjustments to be made. It takes time and patience to deal with a significant loss. Following the suggestions above should take away some of the pain and stress associated with these types of experiences.

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