GRIEF AND LOSS

- Grief is a normal and natural, though often deeply painful, response to loss. The death of a loved one is the most common way we think of loss, but many other significant changes in one's life can involve loss and therefore grief. Everyone experiences loss and grief at some time. The more significant the loss, the more intense the grief is likely to be. Each individual experiences and expresses grief differently. For example, one person may withdraw and feel helpless, while another might be angry and want to take some action.

- The process of grieving in response to a significant loss requires time, patience, courage, and support. The grieving person will likely experience many changes throughout the process. Many professional helpers have described these changes beginning with an experience of shock, followed by a long process of suffering, and finally a process of recovery. These processes are described below.

- **Shock** is often the initial reaction to loss. Shock is the person's emotional protection from being too suddenly overwhelmed by the loss. The grieving person may feel stunned, numb, or in disbelief concerning the loss. While in shock the person may not be able to make even simple decisions. Friends and family may need to simply sit, listen, and assist with the person's basic daily needs. Shock may last a matter of minutes, hours, or (in severely traumatic losses) days.

- **Suffering** is the long period of grief during which the person gradually comes to terms with the reality of the loss. The suffering process typically involves a wide range of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, as well as an overall sense of life seeming chaotic and disorganised. The duration of the suffering process differs with each person, partly depending on the nature of the loss experienced. Some common features of suffering include:

  - **Sadness** is perhaps the most common feeling found in grief. It is often but not necessarily manifested in crying. Sadness is often triggered by reminders of the loss and its permanence. Sadness may become quite intense and be experienced as emptiness or despair.

  - **Anger** can be one of the most confusing feelings for the grieving person. Anger is a frequent response to feeling powerless, frustrated, or even abandoned. Anger is also a common response to feeling threatened; a significant loss can threaten a person's basic beliefs about self and about life in general. Consequently, anger may be directed at self, at God, at life in general for the injustice of the loss, for others involved, or, in the case of death, at the deceased for dying.

  - **Guilt** and less extreme self-reproach are common reactions to things the griever did or failed to do before the loss. For example, a griever may reproach him/herself for hurtful things said, loving things left unsaid, not having been kind enough when the chance was available, actions not taken that might have prevented the loss, etc.
• **Anxiety** can range from mild insecurity to strong panic attacks; it can also be fleeting or persistent. Often, griever become anxious about their ability to take care of themselves following a loss. Also they may become concerned about the well-being of other loved ones.

• **Physical, behavioral and cognitive symptoms.** Often, grief is accompanied by periods of fatigue, loss of motivation or desire for things that were once enjoyable, changes in sleeping and eating patterns, confusion, preoccupation, and loss of concentration.

• Suffering is often the most painful and protracted stage for the griever, but it is still necessary. For most people, these many emotional and physical reactions are common symptoms that will stabilise and diminish with time as the person moves through the grieving process. If these symptoms persist, it may be important to seek professional help.

• **Recovery**, the goal of grieving, is not the elimination of all the pain or the memories of the loss. Instead, the goal is to reorganize one’s life so that the loss is one important part of life rather than the center of one’s life. As recovery takes place, the individual is better able to reinvest time, attention, energy and emotion into other parts of his/her life. The loss is still felt, but the loss has become part of the griever's more typical feelings and experiences.

• In a shock, your actions are mechanical. You do what you have to do. In suffering, your actions are forced by convention or by your own restlessness. But in recovery, your actions are by your own free choice.

**Suggestions for Coping with Grief**

**Accept the reality of the loss.** When someone dies, even if the death is expected, there is always a sense that it hasn't happened. Coming to grips that the loss is real takes time since it involves an intellectual acceptance as well as an emotional one. The viewings, funerals, and all of the things you go through the first two to three weeks after the death help you toward acceptance. Roll with the tides of it. Do not try to be brave. Take time to cry.

**Talk about your loss.** Share your grief within the family. Do not try to protect them by silence. Also find a friend to talk to. Talk often. If the friend tells you to “snap out of it,” find another friend to talk to.

**Deal with guilt, real or imagined.** You did the best you could at the time. If you made mistakes, accept the fact that you, like everyone else, are not perfect. Only hindsight is 20/20. If you continue to blame yourself, consider professional counselling.

**Eat well.** Grief stresses the body. You need good nourishment now more than ever, so get back to a good diet soon. Vitamin and mineral supplements may help.
Exercise regularly. Exercise lightens the load through bio-chemical changes. It also helps you to sleep better. Return to an old program or start a new one. An hour-long walk every day is ideal for many people.

Nurture yourself. Each day try to do something good for yourself. Think of what you might do for someone else if they were in your shoes and then do that favour for yourself.

Join a group of others who are sorrowing. Your old circle of friends may change. Even if it does not, you may need new friends who have been through an experience similar to yours.

Associate with old friends also. Some will be uneasy, but they will get over it. If and when you can, talk and act naturally, without avoiding the subject of your loss.

Postpone major decisions. Wait before deciding whether or not for example, to change jobs.

Record your thoughts in a journal. Writing helps you get your feelings out. It also shows your progress.

Turn grief into creative energy. Find a way to help others. Sharing someone else's load will lighten your own. Write something as a tribute to our loved one.

Take advantage of a religious affiliation. If you have been inactive, this might be the time to become involved again. For some people, grief opens the door to faith. After a time, you might not be as mad at God as you once were.

Get professional help if needed. Do not allow crippling grief to continue. There comes a time to stop crying and to live again. Sometimes just a few sessions with a trained counsellor will help a lot.

No matter how deep your sorrows, you are not alone. Others have been there and will help share your load if you will let them.