

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Your Parent's – Your Care-receiver's – Grief

To grieve after the death of a loved one doesn't mean experiencing a single emotion. Grief involves a host of feelings.

It's commonly accepted there's a "cycle of grief." There are pieces or periods of the grieving process. But those pieces, those periods, don't necessarily follow a set pattern or stick to a particular time frame. Even after going through one part, the griever may—time and again—return to that aspect of grief.

How one grieves, just as how one lives and how one loves, is unique for each individual.

With that in mind, it sometimes helps to understand that within the cycle there are four sections:

1. Shock and denial.
2. Anger and guilt.
3. Depression.
4. Adjustment or acceptance.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a pioneer in bereavement ministry and author of "On Death and Dying," adds one more section. In the middle she includes bargaining. If Mom promises to be very good, no one else she loves will die. If she vows to be perfect, maybe all of this is some kind of mix-up or mistake and Dad isn't really dead.

It's an extremely stressful time. That wide, multi-layered range of emotions can be constantly shifting.

What can you expect from your care-receiver if he or she is grieving? (Or if you're going through grief?) It's an extremely stressful time. That wide, multi-layered range of emotions can be constantly shifting.

Your loved one's anger, loneliness, sense of loss and even physical pain can be triggered by any number of things. By realizing "his" favorite television program is about to start. By even thinking about attending Sunday Mass without her. (Many a widow or widower finds it *extremely* difficult to go to "their" Sunday Mass alone.) By seeing an item in the newspaper that would have amused him. By coming up on a Christmas, a birthday, an anniversary without her.

By catching a whiff of Old Spice after-shave. By smelling bacon cooking. By holding her hair brush or his hammer. By hearing "their" song played on the radio. By so many things your parent sees or hears or touches or tastes or feels.

In grief's early stages it's not uncommon to feel anxious and vulnerable. To feel ill. There may be a tightness in the chest and throat. Headaches. Fatigue. Stomach problems.

Mom may not be able to eat. May not be able to sleep or can't seem to do anything but sleep. May not be able to stop crying. May worry that she's going crazy.

Dad may withdraw socially. He may want to be alone, or he may become more dependent on another family member.

What can you do to help your parent if he or she is grieving? (What can you do to help yourself?) These are some points to consider:

- How each person grieves is unique. Mom shouldn't compare how she grieves, or feels the need to grieve, with anyone else's method. The best way for her is whatever works best for her.

- Dad should avoid making any major changes right away. For example, selling the house or moving to another part of the country.

- Mom needs to take care of herself. To eat properly and get enough sleep, even if she doesn't feel like doing either. It may help if, under a doctor's care, she takes medication for a time. Be sure to watch for signs of "self-medicating" using alcohol.

- It may help if Dad "works" on his grief. If, when a feeling surfaces, he doesn't automatically push it aside. To let himself cry when he feels the need to cry, to get angry when he feels mad and so on.

- This can be an incredibly spiritual time in his or her life. And in yours. Encourage your loved one to turn to God.

- Mom may want to consider taking advantage of whatever bereavement ministry her parish or diocese might offer.

- Dad may want to look into taking part in a support group. There are many groups out there, each with its own "personality." If one doesn't seem right, he could think about checking out another.

- Your care-receiver may benefit from professional counseling. A therapist or grief minister can't take away the pain but may help make it more bearable. May help make it easier for your loved one to understand why he or she has all those jumbled feelings. Watch for signs of depression and/or suicide and get help if needed.

- Encourage Mom, when the time is right, to consider having her own ritual for saying good-bye to Dad. Maybe it's visiting the grave site alone. Maybe writing a letter to him, or doing whatever it is that fits her, that fits them, best.

It shouldn't be surprising she feels a need for a private, personal memorial. The relationship the two of them shared was one-of-a-kind, too. It's irreplaceable. □

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