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Loss and Grief

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When we hear the word “loss,” we immediately think of loss of a loved one. While the death of one to whom we are very close may evoke powerful emotions, loss may occur with a variety of life changes including divorce, relocation, layoffs and retirement, to name a few. Understanding loss and our response to it, grief and mourning, may lessen its effect on our lives.

People cope with loss in many different ways. For some, the experience may lead to personal growth, even though it is a difficult and trying time. There is no right way of coping – how a person copes with grief may be affected by personality, experience with loss, cultural and religious background, coping skills, mental history, support systems and social and financial status.

Grief is the normal response of sorrow, emotion and confusion that comes from losing someone or something important to you. Grief is a typical reaction to death, divorce, job loss, a move away from friends and family or loss of good health due to illness. Each type of loss means the person has had something taken away. Grief may be experienced as a mental, physical, social or emotional reaction. Mental reactions may include anger, guilt, anxiety, sadness and despair. Physical reactions can include sleeping problems, changes in appetite, physical problems or illness.

Mourning is the process by which people adapt to a loss. Mourning is also influenced by cultural customs, rituals, and society’s rules for coping with loss. Again, when we think of a mourner, we think of death. However, a mourner is any person adapting to any type of loss which may have occurred.

Grief includes the processes that a mourner needs to complete before resuming daily life. These processes include separating from whom or what was lost and readjusting to a world without that which was lost. The mourner’s roles, identity and skills may need to change. People who are grieving often feel extremely tired because the process of grieving usually requires physical and emotional energy. The grief they are feeling is not just for that which was lost, but also for the unfulfilled wishes and plans for the future.

Most of the support that people receive after a loss comes from friends and family. For people who experience difficulty in coping with their loss, grief counseling or grief therapy may be necessary. Grief counseling may help mourners work through the tasks

of grieving. Grief counseling can be provided by professionally trained people or in self-help groups. All of these services may be available in individual or group settings.

The goals of grief counseling include:

Helping accept the loss by talking about the loss

Helping identify and express feelings related to the loss (for example, anger, guilt, anxiety, helplessness and sadness)

Helping separate emotionally from the loss and to begin new relationships

Helping understand methods of coping, coping problems and recommendations for professional grief therapy

Grief therapy is used with people who have more serious grief reactions. The goal of grief therapy is to identify and solve problems the mourner may have in separating from that which was lost. When separation difficulties occur, they may appear as physical or behavior problems, delayed or extreme mourning, conflicted or extended grief or unexpected mourning.

Depression is more than a feeling of grief after losing someone or something you love. Clinical depression is a whole body disorder that may take over the way you think and feel. Symptoms of depression may include, but are not limited to

A sad, anxious, or "empty" mood that won't go away;

Loss of interest in what you used to enjoy

Low energy, fatigue, feeling "slowed down;"

Changes in sleep patterns and/or appetite

Feeling hopeless or gloomy and/or feeling guilty, worthless, or helpless.

If you recently experienced a death or other loss, these feelings may be part of a normal grief reaction. But if these feelings persist with no lifting mood, you should seek professional help.

Human beings tend to make strong bonds of affection or attachment with persons, tasks and objects within their lives. When these bonds are broken a strong emotional reaction occurs. After a loss occurs, a person must accomplish certain tasks to complete the process of grief. The basic tasks of mourning include

Accepting that the loss happened;

Living with and feeling the physical and emotional pain of grief;

Adjusting to life without that which was lost;

Emotionally separating from the loss.

It is important that these tasks are completed before mourning can end.

For more information, contact your County Extension Agent – Denita Young. You may also access information from the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization:

<http://www.caringinfo.org/GrievingALoss>.

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