Understanding grief

What grief is, how it tends to change over time and what is normal.

Grief is the natural response to losing someone or something that mattered. It is not an illness, and it is not a problem to be solved.

Grief does not come in stages

You may have heard of five stages. They were never meant as steps everyone goes through in order. Real grief is messier. Feelings come in waves, sometimes several in an hour, and return when you least expect them.

Two kinds of work

Most people move back and forth between two things:

Facing the loss

- Feeling the pain and longing
- Remembering, crying, talking about them
- Looking at photos
- Visiting the grave or special places

Rebuilding life

- Dealing with practical changes
- Taking on new roles and tasks
- Having a break from grief
- Finding moments of enjoyment

Both are needed. Going between them, even within a day, is healthy. Time away from the pain is not forgetting or disloyalty. It is how people get the strength to go back to it.

What changes with time

For most people the pain does not shrink so much as life slowly grows around it. The waves come less often and with more warning. The loss stays part of you, and there is room for other things as well.

Things that are normal

- Feeling relief, anger or guilt as well as sadness
- Feeling nothing for a while
- Sensing their presence, or thinking you saw them
- Grieving differently from others in the family
- Being hit hard on anniversaries, years later

Be patient with yourself

There is no correct way to grieve and no set length of time.

The idea of moving between loss and rebuilding comes from Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut. The picture of life growing around grief comes from Lois Tonkin.

My notes and questions

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Between loss and rebuilding

Checking your balance between facing the grief and getting on with life.

Name _____ Date _____

Healthy grieving moves back and forth between spending time with the loss and attending to the life that has to go on. Too much of one can leave you stuck: overwhelmed by pain, or running from it. Tick what you have been doing and add anything else.

Time with the loss

- [ ] Remembering
- [ ] Crying
- [ ] Talking about them
- [ ] Looking at photos
- [ ] Visiting places

Time rebuilding

- [ ] New tasks and roles
- [ ] Practical matters
- [ ] Taking a break
- [ ] Seeing people
- [ ] Small pleasures

Lately I have been mostly...

0 — 1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7 — 8 — 9 — 10

Facing the loss — Rebuilding

What do I notice about my balance?

Do I avoid one side? What am I afraid would happen if I went there?

One thing I could do this week on the side I have been neglecting

Based on the dual process model of Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut.

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