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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