

GRIEF IN THE AGENCY

Grief is a normal reaction to the loss of a fellow law enforcement officer. You may experience grief with a mental, physical, social or emotional reaction. **Mental reactions** include anger, guilt, anxiety, sadness or despair. **Physical reactions** include sleeping problems, changes in appetite, physical problems or illnesses.

HOW DOES GRIEF FEEL?

Grief feels extreme. It involves a range of emotions – emotions you didn't know existed, in addition to those you are familiar with, at a depth and intensity that you never imagined.

For some, the craziness of grief shows up in extreme behaviors. You may find yourself engaging in frenzied activity, whether washing the car or working. Using activity as an outlet for intense feelings or as a break from the wearying tasks of mourning can be healthy. Using it to avoid the pain of grief or engaging in behaviors that are hurtful to yourself and others is not.

While grief is a normal reaction to a significant loss, everyone reacts differently. There is no "right" or "wrong" way to experience grief. Over your career, you may react differently to similar circumstances that occur years apart. One person's response may be totally different than another person's. The intensity of these emotions can be more than your friends and family can tolerate. You may find relief in talking to an experienced mental health professional.

WHAT ARE THE MENTAL EFFECTS OF GRIEF?

Trauma changes your chemical make-up and brain wave function; which in turn impacts everything you do. It can make you think crazy thoughts and do crazy things; you may not be able to concentrate and remember how to do basic tasks. It's maddening, but it's normal. Although it is easier said than done, try to be patient with yourself. If you must make decisions, talk them over with the people you trust.

There may be a part of you that cannot believe what happened is really true. You may find yourself inventing crazy scenarios that better explain why this person is gone. Your inability to accept what has happened is a reflection of the enormity of your loss, not of your mental health. Don't let anyone try to convince you otherwise.

WHAT ARE THE PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF GRIEF?

Headaches, sleep disturbances, muscle tension, rapid heartbeat, nausea, aches and pains, compromised immunity, and stomach pain are just a few ways grief can manifest itself physically. If you already have a medical condition, grief may impact that as well. Stay in touch with your doctor; force yourself, if you have to, so that your physical health can be monitored. There's no point in adding an unnecessary level of stress to your life.

The only way to get on the other side of grief is to slog through it. Grief can be postponed, but it cannot be dodged, skirted or gone under or over. And remember, as painful and as crazy-making as grief is, the intensity of the grief is testimony to the power of your love and the significance of your loss.

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APPROPRIATE EXPECTATIONS WHILE GRIEVING

- Your grief may take longer to end than most people think.
- Your grief may take more energy than you would have ever imagined.
- Your grief may involve many changes and always be developing.
- Your grief may show itself in all spheres of your life: psychological, social and physical.
- Your grief may depend upon how you perceive the loss.
- You may grieve for many things, both symbolic and tangible, not just the death alone.
- You may grieve for what you have lost and for the future of unfulfilled expectations you held with that person, and for the needs that will go unmet because of the death.
- Your grief may involve a variety of feelings and reactions, not solely those that are generally thought of as grief, such as depression and sadness.
- The loss may resurrect old issues, feelings and unresolved conflicts from the past.
- You may have some identity confusion as a result of this major loss and the fact that you are experiencing reactions that may be quite different.
- You may have a combination of anger and depression, such as irritability, frustration and annoyance or intolerance.
- You may feel some anger and survivor guilt, or at least some manifestation of these emotions.
- You may have a lack of self-concern.
- "You may experience grief spasms – surges of grief that occur suddenly without warning.
- You may have trouble thinking (memory, organization and intellectual processing) and making decisions.
- You may feel like you are going crazy.
- You may be obsessed with the death and preoccupied with the deceased.

- You may begin a search for meaning and may question your religion and/or philosophy of life.
- You may find yourself acting socially in ways that are different than before.
- You may find yourself having a number of physical reactions.
- You may find that there are certain dates, events and stimuli that cause surges in grief.
- Society may have unrealistic expectations about your mourning and may respond inappropriately to you.
- Certain experiences later in life may temporarily resurrect feelings of intense grief.



INCIDENT DEBRIEFING

Many law enforcement agencies have developed Critical Incident Stress Management Teams that provide emotional support following traumatic incidents. It is highly recommended that an agency that loses an officer in the line of duty hold a defusing within 12-24 hours of the incident and debriefings following the funeral. These are NOT to critique the actions of officers, but to address the emotional issues that the incident has created for officers/department employees (don't forget dispatchers, forensic teams, or clerks) involved in the incident.

SURVIVOR GUILT

A follow-up debriefing for all involved in the incident is also recommended shortly after the funeral of the fallen officer to ensure people are coping with the incident as good as can be expected. "Survivor guilt" is often experienced by those intimately involved in a life-claiming incident. The question of "Why them and not me?" can eat away at a co-worker and lead to chronic depression, post-traumatic stress injury, and even thoughts of suicide. If you or someone you know is experiencing "survivor guilt", seek professional counseling.