Common Characteristics of Grief

There are a variety of feelings and behaviors which can be experienced in the grief process. Not everyone will respond to loss in the same way. It is helpful to know that the following characteristics can be a normal part of the grief experience. Here are a few examples:

**Feelings**
- Shock
- Numbness
- Sense of unreality
- Anger
- Irritability
- Guilt
- Self reproach
- Sadness
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Helplessness
- Vulnerability
- Low self-esteem
- Loneliness
- Relief
- Feelings of being crazy
- Mood swings
- Intensity of all feelings

**Physical Sensations**
- Hollowness in the stomach
- Tightness in the chest and throat
- Dry mouth
- Oversensitivity to noise
- Dizziness
- Headaches
- Shortness of breath
- Weakness in the muscles, lack of energy
- Fatigue
- Excess of nervous energy heart pounding
- Heavy or empty feeling in body and limbs
- Hot or cold flashes
- Skin sensitivity
- Stomach & intestinal upsets
- Increase in physical illnesses

**Thought Patterns**
- Disbelief
- Preoccupation
- Confusion
- Lack of ability to concentrate
- Seeing, hearing, feeling the presence of the deceased
- Thoughts of self destruction
- Problems with decision-making

**Behaviors**
- Appetite and sleep disturbances
- Absent minded behavior
- Social withdrawal
- Avoiding reminders of the loss
- Dreams of the loss
- Searching and calling out for the deceased
- Restlessness
- Sighing
- Crying
- Visiting places that are reminders of the loss
- Treasuring
- Carrying objects that belong to the deceased
- Change in sexual activities
- Need for touch, hugs, or contact with others
- Increased sensitivity to positive and negative attention
- Picking up mannerisms of the deceased
- Exhibiting symptoms of deceased’s illness

**Social Changes**
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Increased dependency on others
- A need for acting “normal” around others
- A need for relationships apart from those related to grief
- Self-absorbed (no energy for interest in others)
- Marital difficulties
- Family role changes
- Role reversals
- Change in social patterns and status
- Hypersensitivity to topics of loss
- Need for rituals

**What have you experienced?**
Suggestions for Helping Yourself through Grief

Treating yourself with care and affection is important in your journey through grief. Below is a list of suggestions which may be helpful to you.

Be Gentle with Yourself
Don’t rush. Be patient—healing takes time. Don’t have unrealistic expectations.

Accept Your Feelings
Allow yourself to feel the emotions that arise. It’s OK to be angry. It’s OK to cry or feel depressed. It’s even OK to feel a sense of relief about the death. These feelings are a natural part of grief.

Identify Your Support System
Finding people who are supportive to you can be a comfort. Calling upon them is a step toward caring for yourself.

Share Your Grief
Express your feelings to others who can support you. Don’t hide your emotions for those who care. Sharing your grief can be a relief.

Be Attentive to Your Physical Needs
Be sure that your body is nurtured by getting properly balanced meals, adequate sleep and exercise each day.

Limit Alcohol and Drugs
They cannot cure grief. They can prolong, delay and complicate your grief. Remember that any substance that “numbs” challenging emotions also “numbs” positive ones.

Be Attentive to Your Emotional Needs
Acknowledge and applaud yourself for making it through each day. Discover the simple things that you can do to nurture yourself.

Give Permission to Change Your Routine
Although major life changes should be avoided, giving yourself permission to change the little reminders of your lost relationship can aid you in the grief process. Changing the furniture around in the house, the schedule of when you have meals or go to bed, or the place where you eat or shop can all be small steps toward building a new life.

Identify Your Trouble Spots
Birthdays, anniversaries, special holidays, and even at certain times of ordinary days, may be difficult to get through. Special places may also be uncomfortable reminders for you. Knowing what times and places create discomfort for you allows you to plan ahead to face them. Giving yourself permission to feel the feelings is easier than trying to pretend the hurt is not there.