

Bereavement Overload - Coping With Multiple Losses

How can anyone cope with the death of more than one family member when those deaths occur in a short period of time? What happens to the person who is grieving the death of a loved one, then loses a job, and has to move from their home or apartment because of financial conditions? Multiple losses occur more frequently than most people realize and they can complicate the mourning process.

To begin with, it is important to recognize that we grieve many changes in life other than the death of a loved one. The break-up of any close relationship, divorce, incarceration, geographical relocation, children going off to college, destructive fires, workplace changes, or the loss of family heirlooms can bring a strong grief reaction. In most instances, these losses can bring a cascade of emotional responses as strong as those associated with the death of a loved one.

How can we cope with these massive changes or help someone who is experiencing more than one of these losses? Consider the following.

1. Recognize that people suffering multiple losses will generally need much more time to sort out their feelings and deal with their losses. Often the intensity of grief will be stronger and the mourner will need assistance in prioritizing their needs in dealing with each loss, one at a time.
2. Now more than ever the person dealing with multiple losses needs trusted grief companions who will listen to the pain being experienced and expressed. Much commitment is needed from caregivers who will not reduce their contact with the mourner over time or make comparisons of one mourner with another. Allowing grief to run its course in the circumstances of multiple loss, is a gigantic commitment for the caregiver.
3. If you are suffering multiple losses be patient with yourself. You cannot expect a speedy resolution of all of the changes that need to be addressed. There will be some trial and error moments and you will have to sit down and try another avenue of approach, when one plan doesn't work. Do not rush yourself. Easier said than done, of course, when in pain. But that is why you need people who can be around pain.
4. More than ever before, it is essential to take care of yourself. Self-care is an absolute priority since the energy drains from multiple loss are extremely high. Schedule a rest period daily, preferably in nature, where birds, trees, water, and other wildlife can remind you of the importance of connections and the peace that will replenish your mind and body. And above all, walk, walk, walk.
5. Never forget: you are not being punished. Don't fall into thought traps like "I'm getting what I deserve" or "This is what happens when you don't do the right thing." Such negative thinking only increases unnecessary suffering and distracts from facing the new life that multiple losses dictate. Remember: that type of thinking takes a major toll on your physical self as well as your emotional well-being.

6. Continually tell yourself you will get through this dark night of the soul. It is hell, and ever so painful, but you are a survivor, who will use the support and insight of others to adjust and start over. You are normal even though it all feels so abnormal. There is nothing wrong with your feeling of being overwhelmed. Anyone would be. Keep coaching yourself to persist--it will make a big difference.

7. Feelings and thoughts change and new ones will pop into your mind and body over the long haul. Look for ongoing support structures. They could be exceptional friends, a grief support group (many members are dealing with multiple losses), a clergy person, or a professional grief counselor. The information you need, to deal with your particular circumstances, is out there. Half the battle is finding the people who can provide an idea or two that you have yet to hear.

8. Also, even though you are inundated with pain and anxiety, do not give up on listening to the best source of all--your own wisdom. You have it inside right now to know what to do. You are much more capable than you think you are.

When alone in the evening, ask yourself (or God, your Higher Power, even your deceased loved one) for insights to deal with a particular problem. Then listen ever so carefully for what thoughts or images come into your mind. You inherently know what is needed better than anyone else. The trick is to tap your inner wisdom with confidence.

To summarize, many people suffer multiple losses and the resulting bereavement overload. Although multiple losses tend to exacerbate the length and intensity of the grief process, breaking down and prioritizing where to begin coping with so many changes (both inner and outer) is the place to start.

It is excruciating and pain-filled work, yet success in adapting to multiple changes will happen gradually. Keep your self-talk positive (we often are our own worst enemy), allow for a relapse or two, but know that you can outlast these massive changes, and get through your demanding ordeal.

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