

Common Reactions to Life Changes

We react in our own unique way to changes in our lives. While most common reactions are considered normal, unexpected, seemingly uncontrollable emotional and/or physical reactions that can be disconcerting are also normal. This list includes many of these:

1. You may cry with no apparent reason.
2. Your mood changes quickly. You may feel intense sadness one moment and guilty, angry or numb the next.
3. You can't believe this change has occurred. You deny that your life has changed, or temporarily forget the loss has occurred.
4. Your mind is so distracted that you may: be unable to concentrate on reading material; lose your train of thought in the middle of a sentence; walk into a room and forget why; lose things or forget appointments.
5. You may feel tightness in your throat or heaviness in your chest. You may have an empty or nauseated feeling in your stomach. You either lack the desire to eat or can't stop eating. You have difficulty sleeping or sleep all the time. You have no energy.
6. You don't know how to respond to others asking "How are you?" You feel awkward and uncertain as to whether others are interested in your grief.
7. You feel a need to review the days, months or years before the change to determine if there are things that should have been done or said differently.

Signs of Reactions to Life Changes

The reactions that occur after a major life change surprise many of us. We expect to cry and be sad, but there are other, normal, reactions that accompany a life change, which can be confusing.

Numbness: Feeling as though you are on “auto pilot.”

Anger: At the doctors, the hospital, your family, your boss.

Regrets: “I should have...” a running commentary of all the things you wish you had/had not done.

Feeling worse: Most people find that it takes almost six weeks before the full effects of grief hit. It can be an unwelcome surprise to find that you feel worse after two months than you felt after two weeks.

Physical reactions: You may feel pain in your stomach or chest, have more frequent colds and viruses, often feel tired, or have a change eating or sleeping patterns.

Strange sensations: At times you may feel as if the loss will change or is not permanent.

Outbursts: Sudden tearfulness even though you were fine the moment before; sudden anger, for example, over an insensitive statement.

Forgetfulness: Easily forgetting simple things from phone numbers to where you put the mail.

Pictures: Finding yourself reliving images from before your life changed.

Although possibly disturbing, all of these responses, and many more, are normal reactions to a major life transition.

Ways to Help Children Cope

With your patient, loving, and consistent concern, most children will be able to work through this process and adjust to life.

Explain as much as possible to the child in advance. Children need information they can understand about the changes in their lives now and in the future.

Be direct, simple and truthful. Listen carefully to what the child is telling you and asking you. Then respond according to the child's needs.

Encourage the child to express feelings openly. Remember that crying is a normal response. It's all right for a child to see you cry. Be sure to talk to the child about your tears and reassure them that, even though you are crying and feeling sad, you are all right.

Try to accept the emotions and reactions of the child. Avoid telling a child how she/he should or should not feel.

Offer your physical presence and affection. Sometimes words are not necessary.

Share your feelings with the child. They will probably need to know how you are doing, even if they don't know how to ask.

Be patient. Remember that children need to ask the same questions over and over again.

Maintain as many routines that are familiar to the child as is possible. Stability and security are important during times of transition.

Allow the child to make some of her/his own decisions about participating in family activities.

The Impact of Life Changes

A sudden detour from the path we thought our life was going to take sends us into uncertain territory. We are going from life as it was to life as it's going to be. Many have described this transition as if they have been scooped up out of their lives and dropped into a land where they don't speak the language, there are no maps, they don't know where they are supposed to go, or how they are supposed to get there. These life changes affect us on all levels:

Emotional: The most noticeable emotion is usually sadness. If you look a little closer, there can be anger, guilt, loneliness, frustration, relief, shock and just about every other emotion. We may cry spontaneously with no apparent reason. Feelings may change very quickly, from sadness to guilt to anger to numbness. We can't believe this change has occurred or sometimes forget how our life has changed.

Physical: The emotional turbulence creates a physical reaction. We can be very tired. We may experience tightness in the throat or heaviness in the chest; an empty or nauseated feeling in the stomach; changes in eating or sleeping patterns.

Cognitive: Because our minds are distracted trying to cope, we may have difficulty with concentration and memory. We may not be able to concentrate on reading material, lose our train of thought in the middle of a sentence, walk into a room and forget why; lose things or forget appointments.

Spiritual: We are rational beings, so we want answers: Why me? Why him/her? Why now?

Financial: Unexpected costs can create unexpected financial strain. Medical costs, travel costs, special care costs.

Eight Myths and Realities About Grief

Grief is a normal response to any loss, not just the death of a loved one. Major events in our lives, illness, divorce and job changes are all losses that can affect us deeply. These are some common misconceptions about grief:

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| Myth 1: | We only grieve deaths. |
| Reality: | We grieve all losses. |
| Myth 2: | Only family members grieve. |
| Reality: | All who are attached grieve. |
| Myth 3: | Grief is an emotional reaction. |
| Reality: | Grief is shown in many ways. |
| Myth 4: | Individuals should leave grieving at home. |
| Reality: | We cannot control where we grieve. |
| Myth 5: | We slowly and predictably recover from grief. |
| Reality: | Grief is an uneven process, with no time line. |
| Myth 6: | Grieving means letting go: of our life before things changed. |
| Reality: | We never fully let go of important things in our lives. |
| Myth 7: | Grief finally ends. |
| Reality: | Over time, most people learn to live with loss. |
| Myth 8: | People who are grieving are best left alone. |
| Reality: | People who are grieving need opportunities to share their memories and grief, and to receive support. |

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