

## **Grief: Responding to Loss**

### **Introduction**

Welcome to the Grief: Responding to Loss session of the *Living in Balance* program. This session focuses on the way in which people respond to loss through grieving. The session describes how different people react to loss and grief, including both normal and abnormal grief. Also described are some of the factors that influence how much a loss will affect an individual and some of the ways people try to cope with loss. Finally, the session describes the typical stages in the grief process and how a person can move through them in order to find some resolution for his or her grief.

### ***What is in this session?***

This session has two major parts: (1) Understanding Grief and (2) Stages of Grief.

- ✓ After participating in part 1, you will be able to
  - Understand what grief is
  - Understand how people react to grief, including both normal and abnormal reactions
  - Understand some of the things that influence the strength of people's feelings of grief



**SESSION 31 HAS  
TWO MAJOR PARTS:**

1. Understanding Grief
2. Stages of Grief

- ✓ After participating in part 2, you will be able to
  - Understand the basic stages of grief people go through when dealing with a serious loss
  - Understand how you can deal with grief in a healthy and positive manner
  - Understand how you can get through your grief and grow emotionally from the experience

### ***What will be asked of you?***

You will be asked to remember some painful memories as you look at your reactions to loss and grief, when you were using as well as both before and after. You will also be asked to look closely at the process of grieving, how people manage to deal with it, and how they learn from the experience. Working through this session may be challenging. However, loss is a part of life that we all must deal with. By improving your understanding of loss and grief, you will be better able to deal with these problems when they occur. By working through this session, you will add an important tool to your recovery and relapse prevention program.



## **Part 1: Understanding Grief**

### **Loss and Grief**

*Grief* is the feeling that people have when they have lost something important. Because grief is an emotional response, people who are in active addiction most likely can't feel it fully and completely. Alcohol and other drugs distort and hide emotions and feelings, so important things can happen to a person without much of a reaction. This is especially true with loss.

Just as some losses are more important than others, the intensity of reactions can range from mild grief to severe grief. Grief is a normal response to personal loss.

Many people who experienced a painful loss early in life, such as the death of a parent or a close grandparent, use alcohol or



#### **LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 1:**

You will

- Understand what grief is
- Understand how people react to grief, including both normal and abnormal reactions
- Understand some of the things that influence the strength of people's feelings of grief

other drugs to deal with the emotional pain. Others, who never had a chance to mourn or grieve over the loss of a loved one in a safe and supportive environment, keep the pain inside until they learn that drugs can provide a temporary escape from this pain.

Pain is a sign that something is wrong, and that's true of emotional pain, too. If you don't ever deal with emotional pain, it never really goes away.



### EXERCISE 1

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. What did alcohol and/or other drugs do to your feelings?

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2. Did you notice a change in the way your feelings affected you when you got sober?

Yes     No

If so, what kind of change took place?

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3. Do you think you have unresolved grief about things that happened before or while you were using?

Yes     No

If so, what things?

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4. In what ways can grief become a problem to your sobriety?  
In what ways can you enhance your recovery program to prevent it from becoming a problem?

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**Not Realizing or Experiencing a Loss**

When people use alcohol and other drugs, they may not realize when they lose something that's important to them. Because of the overwhelming need to use drugs, people may lose friends, the trust of family members, and their health without realizing it.

When people in active addiction realize that they have lost something important, they often don't feel the loss. Instead, they may try to say that whatever was lost was not really important to them. Or they may try to convince themselves that the loss had nothing to do with their drug use. These people also may try to cover up their emotional reaction to the loss.

Grief, however, is an emotional process. It takes time to get through it.



**When people use alcohol and other drugs, they may not realize when they lose something that's important to them.**

**EXERCISE 2**

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Have you ever lost something important because of alcohol or other drugs and not been aware of the loss at the time?

Yes     No

If yes, what happened?

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2. Have you ever lost something important because of alcohol or other drugs and not had what you would call a normal reaction to that loss?

Yes     No

If yes, what happened?

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3. Have people ever been mad at you because you were not bothered about an important loss while they experienced strong reactions to the loss?

Yes     No

If yes, what happened?

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4. In what ways can covering up an emotional response to loss be a problem to your sobriety? In what ways can you enhance your recovery program to prevent it from becoming a problem?

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## Normal and Abnormal Grief

*Normal grief* can be mild or intense. In response to a major loss, most people feel shock and astonishment. The first thing they may say is, "I can't believe this happened." Then they often go through a period of intense sadness and find no enjoyment in things that normally brought them happiness.

The person feeling grief may withdraw and want to be alone for a time. At some point, people usually need to protest the loss by getting angry at whatever they think caused the loss. At the end of this process, they gradually come to terms with the loss.

*Abnormal grief* can be felt in response to an important or a minor loss. Signs of abnormal grief include the following:

- Having intense physical problems that go on for long periods of time
- Being preoccupied with the loss for many years
- Feeling overwhelmed by guilt for a long time
- Isolating oneself from friends and family

While many people may have some physical symptoms during times of grief, most do not have intense physical problems for long periods of time.

Although many people are preoccupied with major losses for a time, it usually passes within weeks, months, or maybe years. But they eventually "let go" and come to terms with their loss.

Although the pain of some losses, such as a death of a loved one, may never go away completely, constantly thinking about the person and being sad should eventually go away.

While many feel guilty about certain losses, most people do not let the guilt overpower them. Even when they directly caused the loss, most people realize that continual guilt is self-destructive.

Although grief makes most people want to withdraw socially, they still find comfort in the company of others. Grief does not usually cause a person to stop feeling warmth in relationships with others.

**Normal grief can be mild or intense.**





**EXERCISE 3**

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. What are some times when you felt grief?

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Were you using alcohol or other drugs at the time?

Yes     No

If so, what happened to your grief when you used?

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2. Grief can be mild or severe. What are some personal examples of less significant losses and less intense grief?

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3. In what ways can “abnormal grief” become a problem to your sobriety? In what ways can you enhance your recovery program to prevent it?

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### **How Do You Deal with Loss?**

People deal with loss in very different ways. You may have heard of instances with elderly couples, in which one person died within a few weeks or months of the other because the grief was so great. But other people go through incredible losses, yet still lead happy, healthy, and positive lives.

Losses can become major crises that stop people from growing emotionally and socially—or losses can also be successfully incorporated into life, becoming powerful learning and growing experiences. Growing from losses may involve an evaluation of the meaning of the loss for you.

***The need for self-assessment.*** People who use alcohol and other drugs live from crisis to crisis. The need to use alcohol or other drugs stops them from looking at and evaluating their lives. However, self-evaluation is necessary to fully understand how losses affect one’s life and what steps need to be taken in order to return to a healthy life.

***The need to assess relationship changes.*** Losses may involve the death of a friend or relative, the loss of a friendship, or the

loss of someone's trust. Before there can be any healing of a relationship, it is essential to clearly understand what the relationship was, and what it appears to be now. Relationships often change because the roles and responsibilities that people have toward one another change. Thus, it is important to describe what the roles were, and what they appear to be now.

***The need to assess changes in routines.*** Major losses may cause changes in routines and habits. For example, following the death of a spouse, people often go through a long period of crisis and stop their normal routines. Understanding how habits have been put aside can help the person get through the crisis and return to a more comfortable routine.



**EXERCISE 4**

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Why is it necessary for people to make a personal assessment following an important loss?

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2. In what ways can people's routines and habits change following an important loss?

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3. In what ways can self-assessments about loss enhance your recovery and relapse prevention program?

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**Grief Reactions**

It is normal for people to feel grief after a loss. However, the specific type of grief reaction will depend upon several factors. The more important a loss is, the more intense the grief. The use of alcohol or other drugs can diminish one’s ability to feel grief or can stop it entirely. A person’s overall physical and emotional health can also greatly affect grief reactions.

For example, people who are already depressed and anxious are more likely to feel intense periods of grief after a major loss. The same is true of people who already feel helpless or overwhelmed with problems. *Emotional symptoms* include misery, despair, apathy, depression, self-doubt, confusion, fear, loss of sex drive, loss of appetite, shame, guilt, and anger at oneself or others.

Intense grief may include *physical symptoms* such as nervousness, restlessness, insomnia, headaches, backaches, weakness, fatigue, and exhaustion.



**Intense grief may include physical symptoms.**



**EXERCISE 5**

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Have you experienced physical symptoms because of grief?

Yes     No

What were the physical symptoms you experienced?

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2. Have you experienced emotional symptoms because of grief?

Yes     No

What were they?

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3. In what ways can emotional and physical symptoms of grief become a problem to your sobriety? In what ways can you enhance your recovery program to prevent them from becoming a problem?

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## Factors That Affect Loss and Grief

People differ in the ways that they handle losses and feel grief. Some of the factors that affect how one experiences grief include:

***Coping ability.*** People who have had previous crises and losses may be better prepared for losses and grief because they have already developed some ability to cope with the trauma.

***Importance of the loss.*** The more important the loss is, the more powerful the grief. The death of a loved one is going to cause more intense grief than the death of a distant relative.

***Circumstances of the loss.*** The circumstances of the loss affect how intense the grief is. The grief one feels for someone who died a violent death, such as by suicide or murder, will be more intense than grief for someone who had been sick for a while and passed away while sleeping.

***Problems associated with the loss.*** The ability of people to deal with problems related to losses can affect grief. For instance, a person's ability to handle problems associated with the criminal justice system, the medical system, financial matters, or other people can make his or her reaction to a loss worse or better.

***Customs and rituals.*** People with religious beliefs and rituals, as well as cultural customs related to grieving, may have a better understanding of how they can express their grief. This can help lessen the effects of the grief.

***Emotional support.*** Emotional and social support from family, friends, acquaintances, and other people can improve a person's ability to handle losses.

***Return to normal routine.*** The more difficult the loss, the longer it takes someone to return to normal habits and routines. However, it works the other way as well. The sooner a person can return to habits and routines, such as normal eating and sleeping patterns or a regular work schedule, the better he or she may be able to cope with the grief.

***Resuming pleasurable activities.*** The ability of people to again enjoy the pleasurable things in life, feel good about themselves, and become hopeful about the future can help to heal the pain of loss.



**EXERCISE 6**

*Please check the answer that seems most true:*

1. Which of the following is not an influence on how someone responds to loss and grief?
  - The person's physical and mental health
  - The fact that everyone experiences the same loss
  - The circumstances of the loss
  - The person's ability to solve problems related to the loss
  
2. Which of the following do you think would cause an average person the most grief?
  - Having a pet get hit by a car and killed
  - Breaking a leg on a ski trip
  - Having his or her child commit suicide
  - Having a grandparent die after a long illness

## Part 2: Stages of Grief

People go through grief in stages. They often experience one stage of grief before going to another. However, many people do not go through these stages in a set order, but move in and out of the various stages at different times.

Being able to recognize these stages of grief can help people better understand what they are going through. For people who are recovering from drug and alcohol addiction, understanding and recognizing the stages of grief lets them realize that their experiences are natural, normal, and temporary. This realization helps them understand that they are going through grief and should ask others for help and not use a drug to get rid of the feeling.

Knowing about the stages of grief can also help people understand what they may expect to feel following a loss. Health care professionals use this information to recognize whether or not people are successfully working through grief, and to help people work through these stages.



### EXERCISE 7

*Please answer the following questions:*

Do you think knowing what to expect when you are going through a grieving process will make it easier to cope?

Yes     No

Why or why not?

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### LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 2:

You will

- Understand the basic stages of grief people go through when dealing with a serious loss
- Understand how you can deal with grief in a healthy and positive manner
- Understand how you can get through your grief and grow emotionally from the experience

**Knowing about the stages of grief can also help people understand what they may expect to feel following a loss.**

**During the period of emotional shock, some people will have overwhelming feelings of panic and fear.**

### **Stage 1: Emotional Shock**

When people experience a significant loss, they often feel an initial emotional shock, which can be a brief and rapid event or a prolonged event, lasting a few days or weeks.

Most people in shock feel a kind of emotional numbness. They may say, "It just doesn't seem real." After the period of shock, many people don't remember much about this time when they were emotionally numb.

During the period of emotional shock, some people will have overwhelming feelings of panic and fear, causing them to seek the comfort and help of friends and family. Others may become angry, perhaps even irrational and filled with uncontrollable rage.

While it is normal to experience emotional shock in response to important losses, not everyone experiences it. Some people are better prepared for crises than other people.

Some of the common characteristics of emotional shock include the following:

- Disbelief
- Fear
- Doubt
- Restlessness
- Confusion
- Agitation
- Panic
- Disorientation
- Detachment
- Helplessness
- Anger
- Incapacitation
- Rage



#### **EXERCISE 8**

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. If you can, describe a situation in which you felt emotionally numb and disoriented. What happened?

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2. Why do you think people go through a stage of emotional numbness when they first experience the shock of a major loss?

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3. In what ways can emotional shock in response to loss be a problem to your sobriety? In what ways can you enhance your recovery program to prevent it from becoming a problem?

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## Stage 2: Emotional Disorganization

When the emotional shock of a major loss wears off, people begin to feel the full impact and pain of the loss. This can be a time of great suffering. The combination of emotions and the life changes that accompany a great loss can unbalance and overwhelm people.

Following major losses, people may think over and over again about the positive and negative aspects of the people or things that have been lost. Grieving people may remember recent arguments with people and forget the good times. Others may remember only the good aspects of a recently lost relative, perhaps even exaggerating these qualities.

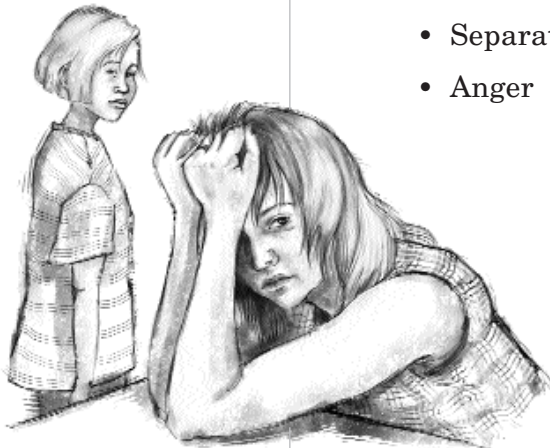
Because the rush of these emotions can be overpowering, people may become confused or disturbed by a major loss. These intense feelings are often new and frightening. As a result, people may have a difficult time recognizing some of the feelings they are having, like bitterness, anger, self-pity, and guilt. People may question their ability to deal with the emotions and survive what they are going through in grieving. Some people may have a temporary loss of self-esteem.

These feelings of confusion and emotional disorganization are temporary and will diminish over time.

Some of the characteristics of emotional disorganization include the following:

- Rumination
- Worry
- Conflicts
- Separation anxiety
- Anger
- Bitterness
- Guilt
- Self-pity
- Prolonged stress
- Oversensitivity

**Because the rush of emotions can be overpowering, people may become confused or disturbed by a major loss.**





**EXERCISE 9**

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Have you ever had a powerful emotional experience that you thought would never stop?

Yes     No

If yes, how did it feel? What happened?

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2. In what ways can emotional disorganization become a problem to your sobriety? In what ways can you enhance your recovery program to prevent it from becoming a problem?

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**Denial is a part of grieving—  
it is an unconscious way  
of protecting oneself from  
facing certain very painful  
aspects of the loss.**

### **Stage 3: Denial**

Throughout the grieving process, people fight against accepting or believing that they have undergone a loss. Often they do this without really realizing it. Much like in addiction, denial is a part of grieving—it is an unconscious way of protecting oneself from facing certain very painful aspects of the loss.

Sometimes, as a form of denial, people will have a strong feeling that isn't what they would expect to be having. For example, rather than feeling a sense of loss, some people will have feelings such as jealousy, anger, or shame, which are replacements for the experience of loss.

***Jealousy.*** People who have gone through a significant loss may become very jealous in situations that remind them of what they've lost. Often without realizing it, they become angry and jealous of others who still enjoy something that they lost. For example, a man whose wife left him because of his addiction may stop spending time with a close friend, because the friend has a happy marriage. Without realizing it, the man may have become jealous of his friend.

***Anger and aggression.*** Some people react to loss by feeling anger, which can be displayed through aggression, irritation, and resentment. They may become annoyed at someone who tries to help them or very angry with friends for almost no reason. For some people, it is easier to feel anger and resentment than to feel a sense of loss.

***Shame.*** Following a major loss, some people feel an overpowering sense of shame. For example, someone may regret the things said to a friend who recently died in an accident or regret not spending more time with a grandparent after he or she passed away. Some may feel shame because they were spared injury while another person was hurt or killed. During the grieving process, feeling a sense of shame can be a way to avoid the deeper sense of loss.



**EXERCISE 10**

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. In what ways is the denial process that people go through in addiction similar to denial in the grieving process?

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2. In what ways is denial, as described on page 20, different from conscious denial and lying?

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3. In what ways can denial about loss be a problem to your sobriety? In what ways can you enhance your recovery program to prevent it from becoming a problem?

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**During this phase, a person needs to rest and recuperate from the emotionally draining process of grieving.**

#### **Stage 4: Exhaustion and Renewal**

When people go through a period of emotional shock and turmoil, they use up a lot of emotional and physical energy. Going through a crisis also often disturbs people's normal sleeping and eating habits, which will make them more tired, both physically and mentally. People going through a major loss may often end up in a state of exhaustion, in which they feel very fatigued, unable to concentrate, and drained of energy.

These people may feel so sad and depressed that they withdraw emotionally and physically from other people. They may feel lonely and lack confidence. Some people may feel hopeless or even suicidal.

This period of exhaustion is a time to recharge one's energy. During this phase, a person needs to rest and recuperate from the emotionally draining process of grieving. The grieving process usually doesn't end here, and a person will need to gather more energy for the difficult work ahead.

Some of the characteristics of emotional and physical exhaustion include the following:

- Fatigue
- Lack of energy
- Exhaustion
- Sadness
- Depression
- Hopelessness
- Suicidal thoughts
- Hibernation
- Physical withdrawal
- Emotional withdrawal





**EXERCISE 11**

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Have you ever felt emotionally exhausted?

- Yes     No

If so, what happened?

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2. How do you think you should react when you feel emotionally and physically exhausted?

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3. In what ways can exhaustion following loss become a problem to your sobriety? In what ways can you enhance your recovery program to prevent it from becoming a problem?

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Many people go through a spiritual awakening as the result of a major loss, while others find new meaning in the power of friendships and family.

### Stage 5: Emotional Healing

At some point in the grieving process, people usually enter a stage of emotional healing in which they begin to learn from the experience of grief and loss. This healing process takes some effort on the part of the grieving individual. There are a number of things a person needs to do in order to recover from the crisis and, it is hoped, learn from it.

**Resume control.** Following a major loss, most people feel as if things are out of control. They go through a chaotic period in which it seems as if they are at the mercy of forces beyond their control. During this time of crisis, things that were once very important are forced to the side as the person becomes preoccupied with other thoughts, feelings, and activities. As the chaos begins to diminish, people can begin to take back control over their lives—first by returning to the routines they put aside during the crisis period.

**Abandon old roles.** When a friend or relative dies, not only do others lose that person, but also they lose the role they played in the relationship with that person. For example, consider the death of a woman who was a mother to her children and a wife to her husband. Following her death, the man is no longer a husband, since he no longer has a wife. As the man begins to accept the fact that he is no longer a husband but is now a single parent, he takes another step in the healing process.

**Search for meaning.** There usually comes a time during the grieving process when people realize that feelings of bitterness and anger are not helping them. This realization may replace these feelings with a more thoughtful, but still emotional, search for meaning. Many people go through a spiritual awakening as the result of a major loss, while others find new meaning in the power of friendships and family. It is an important step to incorporate the lessons learned through grieving into one's life.



**Reorganize priorities.** Losses may help people to realize that things they once thought were important really aren't. For example, after a major loss, families who have always focused on their disagreements may come to realize that the things they share are much more important than the things they disagree about. The loss or near loss of a friend or relative can make someone realize how important it is to live one day at a time and to express feelings of love and concern to others. Sometimes it is only by losing things that people realize how important those things really are.



### EXERCISE 12

Please answer the following questions:

1. Have you ever gone through a loss that caused you to have to change roles?

Yes     No

If so, what happened?

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2. Have you ever gone through a loss that changed your priorities?

Yes     No

How did it change them?

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3. In what ways can emotional healing strengthen your recovery and relapse prevention program?

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**Letting Go**

Important losses are often followed by a lot of “second guessing” or thinking about what might have happened if things had been done differently.

People sometimes focus on all the little things that led to a significant loss and think how a small change could have made a difference. Some people obsess over the details of a crisis that involved loss, or continually worry about the consequences of a loss.

For most people, these obsessive thoughts about crises, mistakes, and losses gradually fade away as they realize that nothing can be done to change what happened. People become aware that continuing to live in the past will not change the past.

People will have different ways of letting go, depending on their background and the nature of the loss. For instance, a funeral ceremony is a powerful way for people to deal with the emotions they feel over a friend’s death and say a final good-bye. People who have lost jobs may begin to let go of the loss by looking for a new job. Often, letting go occurs as someone begins to have new, positive experiences and returns to healthy routines.

Letting go of losses is not the same as forgetting or ignoring losses. Letting go means that the losses are no longer the most important and powerful influences over an individual. Even after letting go, a loss may still cause sadness, but it is no longer the cause of overpowering grief.



**EXERCISE 13**

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Have you ever had a hard time emotionally letting go of something?

Yes     No

What happened?

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2. What can people do to help themselves emotionally let go of losses?

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3. In what ways can “letting go” of a loss help to strengthen your recovery and relapse prevention program?

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**Letting go involves forgiveness.**

## Forgiveness

One of the things that keeps people from letting go of painful losses is a difficulty in forgiving. In some ways, it is easier to remain angry and irritated at whoever or whatever one thinks caused the loss than it is to let go of the loss. Some people may stay very angry about their loss in a general way. Others may remain angry with themselves or with a specific person they think is to blame for the loss. Some people may feel a need to blame their loss on someone or something. By staying angry, they can do this.

Being angry can also make people think that they are actually doing something about the loss. It may be easier to remain angry and blame someone or something because it is at least an active process. When people can criticize and complain, they feel that they are actively involved with the loss. Unfortunately, clinging to anger and the need to assign blame actually interferes with the grieving process.

Letting go involves forgiveness, either forgiving someone who caused a loss or forgiving oneself. The most difficult act of forgiveness may be toward people who have died: forgiving them for any harm they may have caused while living.

Major losses can become overpowering by stirring up strong emotions. Many of these emotions must be felt and dealt with. However, at a certain point, it is unhelpful to hold on to feelings, like anger, that are not constructive. Forgiveness and letting go will help to bring about less intense feelings and a return to normal living.



### EXERCISE 14

*Please answer the following questions:*

1. Why do you think some people find it easier to stay bitter and angry than to forgive?

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2. Was there a time in your own life when you found it hard to forgive someone for a wrong that the person had done to you?

Yes     No

What happened?

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3. In what ways can forgiveness following a loss help to enhance your recovery and relapse prevention program?

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4. During this session, you may have become aware of losses or grief that you have covered up or that is still unresolved. What things can you do to assist yourself with this grieving process? Whom can you talk to about these feelings?

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### **Session 31 Summary**

In this session you have learned about the ways people respond to loss through grieving. You have looked at both normal and abnormal responses to grief, and at some of the things that can affect the intensity of grief. Finally, you have learned about the stages of grief and how people typically move through those stages in order to find some resolution for their grief.

Working through this session may have been challenging. However, you have learned that loss is a part of life that we all must deal with. By improving your understanding of loss and grief, you will be better able to deal with these problems when they occur. By working through this session, you have added an important tool to your recovery and relapse prevention program.