

How to Cope with Loss and Grief

Deep Prep

The Big Idea: Trusting in God's love and care helps us through the worst times.

Learning Goal: Learners will understand the inevitability of loss and grief in life and will acquire tools and methods for coping.

Loss comes in all sizes. Sometimes it's a small thing, like losing a tooth. Sometimes it's a big thing, like the death of someone we love dearly. Sometimes it's the loss of health, or the loss of a dream, or a job, or a pet. Significant loss requires that we reorganize our lives, rethink our most basic premises, and live into the future without that which we have lost.

For those of us who have had the rug pulled out from under us, the experience is unforgettable. Many confirmation students may have already been adrift like this. Some may have broken up with a significant other, or watched their own family break apart. Some may have not made the team, or not been chosen after a difficult audition. Still others have traveled the valley of the shadow of death, and struggle to understand the loss of a grandparent or sibling, a friend or parent, a neighbor or teacher.

Faith has much to offer at these times. When the world seems so capricious, what we need most is something solid to rely on. We confess that in baptism we have been claimed forever by God, given a place in God's family, and named as holy and precious. When we experience loss, our identities are shaken. Turning to the sure promise of God's vision of us, we can understand that our value and worth go beyond time and space. Though we may have lost something of great value, and it may seem that the world is not an ally, God still is. The powerful images of Romans 8:38-39, for example, are and have been included in funeral services of many denominations.

We can also turn to the story of Jesus's life and death. Though his life was faultless from God's perspective, he was killed and buried by those who believed he was a threat. On the one hand, we can say that God knows loss from losing this only child. Likewise, we confess that God knows our deepest grief simply because God loves us so. We can appeal to God's presence and empathy. But we can also be comforted by the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. God was determined that death not be the last word, and so we can live in the promise that from any death we experience, big or small, will come life. The devastation of loss will fade in time, and though it will always hurt, it will be redeemed. This is one of the fundamental promises of Easter.

One of the best ways to cope with a loss and the grief that follows is to be gentle about it. The women who loved Dorcas wailed their grief at her death (Acts 9:36-41). Peter did not demand that they not cry. Similarly, Jesus himself wept at the news of his friend Lazarus's death (John 11:33-36). The ancient people of faith often tore their garments (John 11:33-36) or put on sackcloth and ashes (1 Chronicles 21:16) to mourn. Though culturally we do not have rigid rules about how to grieve, we need the space to do so. We certainly shouldn't expect to be back to normal in a few days. Grief specialists say that when we lose something or someone very dear to us, we should assume it will take three years to become who we will be as a result of the loss.

A second critical way to cope with loss and grief is to find support. Some people may not help much, and others will know what to do to help. We need to feel free to ask for what we need, and take the time to tell stories that will help us "replace" what we lost with memories. Those who will be most helpful will be willing to walk with us when we are feeling most vulnerable.

When someone dies, we attend the funeral. Graduations are a time of loss, and the ceremony is a way of marking the transition from one stage of life to another. But what about divorce? Or loss of physical ability? How might we "mark" these transitions? Ceremonies or rituals bring people together so the grieving person can lean on others' strength and hope. Even if the ceremonies aren't formal, finding people who can offer support is critical to coping with loss.

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- We experience loss about many things in life.
- Students may have already experienced significant losses.
- Loss requires that we renegotiate our identities. Grief is the process of learning to live without whatever or whomever we lost.
- Faith offers a steady place in the midst of change.
- We can see God as both empathizing with our grief and also doing something about it. Jesus' resurrection can be a metaphor for God's primary work of bringing life out of death.
- Faith does not mean we should be able to skip grieving, but gives us permission to grieve as we need to.
- We can rely on others for strength and hope when we are grieving.

Opening Prayer

L: Jesus, you know our every need. Be our comfort and refuge in times of loss.

L: Jesus, by your death and resurrection you have given us life. Help us to hold on to your promise of new life given in our baptisms.

L: Jesus, breathe on us your Holy Spirit, that we might know your peace. Amen

Handbook Connection

Read through "How to Console Someone" on page 120 in *The Lutheran Handbook*. Indicate that it is important to seek out those who are grieving, and not to be afraid to ask "how is it going?" Those who are grieving will most likely appreciate being asked. Also, being a caring presence is more important than saying the "right thing." Respond to the suggestions in *The Lutheran Handbook*.

Take a look at "How to Cope with Loss and Grief" on page 121 in *The Lutheran Handbook*. Though our society may lead us to think that getting over loss should happen quickly, the normal grief process is not quick. A period of time and ample space should be given to those who experience loss. Identify people you trust that you might seek out during a time of loss, and write the names of those people in the margins.

Bible Connection: A Word or Two of Comfort

- Find Psalm 23. Out of all the psalms, this is one that has provided comfort for many who are grieving. Read it out loud, one verse at a time. Discuss: How do the images of nature in verses 1-3 convey security? How does the image of God in verses 2-4 provide comfort? How might the abundance described in verses 5-6 help someone in a time of loss?
- Read the story of Jesus's raising of Lazarus in John 11:17-44. How does Martha express her faith? How does Jesus express his grief? How does Jesus' power over death bring hope to those in grief? Invite youth to highlight John 11:25 as a reminder of the promise of hope and eternal life in Christ.

More Bible Connections

Find a volunteer to read Romans 8:31-39. Ask yourself why this reading might be chosen for a funeral service. Suggest that in baptism, we are all a part of "God's elect" (see verse 33). In verses 38-39, Paul comes up with a list of ten things that will not separate us from God's love in Christ. Try to come up with your own list of ten items.

Closing Questions

- What have you found most helpful in this exploration of coping with loss and grief?
- What do you find to be the most difficult part in coping with loss and grief?
- What one thing will you try when relating to a friend who has experienced a loss?

Closing Blessing

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord's face shine on you with grace and mercy. The Lord look upon you with favor, and give you peace. Amen

Learner Sheet: How to Cope with Loss and Grief

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Big Fun Idea

Find a movie on DVD or video that includes the theme of grief and loss (see *My Girl*, PG, 1991, for an example). Share popcorn and drinks, and after the movie, talk about it together.

Big Serving Idea

Ask your pastor or congregational leader for a person who is grieving who might benefit from a homemade meal. Have your small group prepare it together, and arrange to deliver it together. You might consider staying to eat it together.

Prayer Time

Remember your partner's prayer needs—record them here.

Discussion Time

- Look at "How to Console Someone" on page 120 of *The Lutheran Handbook*, and talk about ways to listen effectively. What are some examples of verbal feedback? What are some examples of non-verbal feedback? How do you listen effectively?
- Write the name of a friend or relative who has experienced loss. What might you do to offer comfort to them?
- Mold something that represents the comfort of God. How do you think your creation represents God's comfort?
- During your worship services, how are people who are grieving named in the prayers? Is there a time of silence during the prayers, or an invitation to name those in need of prayer aloud?

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