When one hears the words grief and loss, the next word that most often comes to mind is death. And yet, what would the average college student know about death and dying anyway? This is a subject that we likely think of as happening to other people and certainly not to anyone in our inner circle of family and friends. Unfortunately, that is a false assumption because the reality is that many college students must cope with the sudden loss of family members or close acquaintances. In fact, there is a growing body of research that indicated grief and loss among college students is prevalent. More importantly, those same students may be ill prepared to face a sudden loss, especially if he or she is away from the social support of family and friends.

Another factor in this equation is there are many types of loss that can bring on profound grief including a failed relationship, being away from home for the first time, the sudden ending of a close friendship, loss of ability, the loss of a dream or major goal, being away from one’s cultural traditions, and even doing poorly in one’s academic work. Grief can take many forms depending on our personal makeup, our relationship to what has been lost or the person who has died, and how that loss has affected the meaning in our lives, according to J. Earl Rogers. These are but a few of the reasons why every person should be knowledgeable about grief and loss and how to cope with it in a healthy manner. Many people have heard of the Kubler-Ross stages of grief, but more recent research on the subject indicates that each person navigates a very unique path to dealing with their grief while some can enter a more complicated grief that may require professional help.

Regardless of what kind of loss you have experienced, the most important thing you can do is to accept the fact that you may be in a period of grieving. If you feel unable to perform your normal routine habits like attend class, shower and properly groom yourself, or even make phone calls to connect with family and friends, you may be experiencing the symptoms of grief. First, be gentle with yourself and accept that you are going through a difficult period in your life. It is ok to slow down and take care of yourself. Secondly, if the inability to attend to the normal routine of your life goes on for an extended period of time, then it may be time to seek outside help from a professional. Third, and likely the most important aspect of dealing with your loss, is to recognize that you are the expert in how you express and cope with your grief and loss. There is no one right way to do the work of grieving.

Another important term in any discussion of grief and loss is the word mourning. It has been said that grieving is the state of being when the death or other loss first occurs. Mourning, on the other hand, is the ongoing process of coming to terms with that loss. In other words, it is the “doing” or “working” through our grief and is often the most difficult to experience. When a loss occurs, our bodies protect us from being overwhelmed by making us feel numb. Once the mourning stage begins, we are faced with powerful emotional responses that challenge our belief that we can tolerate the process. One of the most common feelings that surfaces is that of regret. When we lose someone close to us we instantly think of all the things we promised and failed to do or things we said and wish we could now take back, in other words, we have regrets.
A more healthy way to live life so as to not be consumed with regret after an unexpected loss is to practice living in the moment. This means taking the time to have conversations with family and friends to let them know just how important they are in our lives. It means caring enough to have those difficult conversations with another when we have a disagreement, so that the disagreement doesn’t interfere with us having and continuing a loving relationship with that person. Too often, tearfully expressed regrets at a cemetery do little to assuage the pangs of regret over words of love, or forgiveness, or appreciation that were never spoken. Living in the moment or present allows us to make every second of our lives important and experienced to the fullest possible extent.

To understand the process of grief it is important to understand and recognize what many experts in the field describe as the changes we undergo as we navigate grief. First, we experience the shock of the loss, following by the long process of suffering, and then finally a process of recovery. We are more familiar with the reaction described as shock, and how it protects us from being overwhelmed. At this stage, we often need family or friends to help us with the basics of just functioning in life. Shock may last only a few minutes, hours, or even days in the event of a traumatic loss.

After we emerge from the shock we enter the long period of grief where the person comes to terms with the reality of the loss. The suffering process typically involves a wide range of feelings, thoughts and behaviors with life seeming very chaotic and disorganized. The length of time a person spends in suffering is determined by the nature of the loss. Suffering is often marked by feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety and physical, behavioral, and cognitive symptoms. Patterns of sleeping might change; periods of fatigue may seem out of character for the person, lack of interest in things that were once enjoyable may surface. It is not uncommon to feel confused, preoccupied and have a loss of concentration.

With each person the recovery phase of grief arrives at different times. Unless a person enters into complicated grief, recovery will come. This phase is marked not by an elimination of the pain or memories of the loss but a feeling or reorganizing one’s life so that the loss is important but not the center of a person’s life. This represents finding meaning in one’s life while continuing to hold the memory of the person or loss as well. It means moving on while continuing to value what we have lost. It is hard work, but it can be done.

HEALTH WATCH:

Be prepared: It is not if we will experience a loss, but merely when we will experience a loss.

Be gentle with yourself: Don’t expect perfection of yourself after you have experienced a loss.

Be ok with confusion: It is perfectly natural to experience feelings of chaos and confusion.

Be willing to reach out to someone: It is never a good idea to attempt to deal with grief and loss alone.
Be prepared for the healing process to take time: There is no exact time frame for you to get over your grief.

Be comfortable in asking for professional help if you feel your grief has gotten complicated: There are caring professionals trained to help you with the process if you need the extra help.