

# How to Cope with Loss and Grief

**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.

**Opening:** Begin by sharing a high and low from this past week. When each person has had a chance to listen and share, open your session together by praying the following prayer together, out loud.

## Opening Prayer

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

**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.**

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

**Read:** Read the following together, either silently or out loud and pay attention to the questions that the readings bring! If you are comfortable doing so, it is most appropriate to deal with your thoughts and questions on the spot.

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.

## My Faith Story

Share your own experiences of grief. What were your circumstances of the loss? What were your emotions following that experience? What resources did you find that were particularly helpful? What did you experience that was not very helpful? Describe how your faith was affected as a result of this loss.

## How to Console Someone...Tips

- 1) Listen first – Make it known that you're present and available. When the person opens up, be quiet and attentive.
- 2) Be ready to help the person face grief and sadness, not avoid them – The object is to help the person name, understand, and work through his or her feelings, not gloss over them.
- 3) Avoid saying things to make yourself better – "I know exactly how you feel," is seldom true and trivializes the sufferer's pain. Even if you have experienced something similar, no experience is exactly the same. If there is nothing to say, simply be present with the person.
- 4) Show respect with honesty – Don't try to answer the mysteries of life or push your beliefs on them. Be clear about your limitations and abilities. Be ready to let some questions go unanswered. Consolation isn't about having all the answers, it's about bearing one another's burdens.
- 5) Don't put words in God's mouth – Avoid saying, "This is God's will" or, "This is part of God's plan." Unless you heard it straight from God, don't say it!

## How to Cope with Loss and Grief...Tips

- 1) Familiarize yourself with the stages of grief – Experts identify five: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Some add a sixth stage. Grieving persons cycle back and forth through stages, sometime experiencing two or three in a single day. This is normal.
- 2) Express your grief – Healthy ways may include crying, staring into space for extended periods, ruminating, shouting at the ceiling, and sudden napping. Laughing outbursts are also appropriate and should not be judged harshly.

- 3) Identify someone you trust to talk to – Available people can include a spouse, parent, relative, friends, pastor, doctor, or counselor. Many household pets also make good listeners and willing confidants.
- 4) Choose a personal way to memorialize the loss – Make a collage of photos, offer a memorial donation to your church, or start a scrapbook of memories to honor the event. This helps you begin to heal without getting stuck in your grief.

## Points to Ponder

- 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."
- 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. Invite learners to identify people they trust that they might seek out during a time of loss, and encourage them to write the names of those people in the margins.
- Look up 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.

## 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 Ritual

Leader: From our fears, our anxiety, and all that troubles us,

All: Deliver us, O God.

L: For our families, our friends, and those who learn with us today who are grieving,

A: Give your help, O God.

L: For your claiming us as your children in baptism, and the promise of resurrected life with Jesus,

A: We thank you, O God. Amen