

Straight Talk Support Group

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Most people only associate loss and grief with losing someone to death. As we go through our lives as family members of those who are incarcerated, we know all too well that death is not the only thing that brings about a sense of loss or grief. We experience these emotions when we deal with having lost our loved ones to the prison system. Many times we go through this process more than once during their incarceration for a variety of reasons. , That many people do not understand what we go through as prison friends and family members makes our walk with loss and grief more difficult at times. People on the “outside” don’t understand our choice to enter or remain in a relationship with someone who is incarcerated, and many judge us harshly for our choices to love them and remain loyal to them. Even on our good days we often get tired of explaining why we do the things that we do, and rarely do we entrust our feelings of loss and grief with someone who doesn’t even attempt to understand.

While the stages of mourning and grief are the same for everyone, we may not all experience them in the same order, or for the same length of time. The grieving process is personal and individual. No two people grieve alike. In fact, we may not even grieve the same way twice as each loss is somewhat different. Because the outside world continues to go on, and because we have added responsibilities that many others do not have, we often do not have time to place our lives on pause and work through the process of loss and grief.

The loss that we experience when our loved ones are incarcerated can often cause us to evaluate our own feelings about a lot of things, including our relationships with them and with family members and friends. It causes us to sometimes wonder if we are strong enough to deal with the separation, if we have the strength to keep it all together on the outside and still take care of them and our relationship. We are often encouraged by others who don’t understand our plight to “move on with our lives”, yet our lives move on in some ways and stand still in others, which causes us to feel the push and pull of surviving during this difficult time.

The stages of loss and grief, of having a loved one incarcerated can be extremely over whelming. Remember that each of us will experience grief differently as it is a personal experience. Some of us will be outwardly emotional, while some will internalize their feelings and appear stoic. Regardless of how we personally experience our loss and grief, it is important for us to continue to be there for each other, showing our support and encouragement. Let others know that you are there for them, but do not push them into talking about it if they are not ready. Sometimes we have to figure out how we feel to be able to talk about it. That can be immediately or much later.

The Stages of Loss and Grief

1. Denial and Isolation

This is often our first reaction when loss takes place. We tend to deny the fact that the situation is real. This is a normal reaction. It is a time when we make a concerted effort to rationalize the situation and our emotions. It is a defense mechanism that we use to protect ourselves from the initial shock of what has happened. During this stage we tend to block things out and refuse to see or accept the facts regarding our situation. This is a temporary response that allows us to deal with the initial pain of the circumstances we have now found ourselves in.

2. Anger

During the Denial and Isolation Phase, these masking effects begin to fade. At this time, reality and pain rears its ugly head once again. We are still not ready because we cannot deal with the base emotions associated with what we are going through. We redirect these emotions by expressing them with anger. Anger is a secondary emotion often used as a self-protection mechanism when we do not want to deal with other emotions. They are difficult to deal with or overwhelming to us at the time. In our experience, anger may be directed at our loved ones who are incarcerated or at the criminal justice system. We may find ourselves blaming them or resenting them for causing us pain. We may even resent our incarcerated loved ones for leaving us. Once angry, we often feel guilty for it, and this often makes us even angrier.

3. Bargaining

Bargaining is a normal reaction to the helpless and vulnerable feelings that we experience. We want to regain control of our situation. It is at this time that we are overwhelmed with “If only’s”:

If only we had gotten a better lawyer...

If only we had been more supportive to him...

If only...

If only...

Secretly, we make a deal with our higher power in an attempt to postpone the inevitability of our situation. This is where we try to protect ourselves from the painful reality of what we are going through, although it is a weaker line of defense.

4. Depression

There are two types of depression connected with mourning. The first is a reaction to the practical things related to our loss. Here we deal with sadness, regret, and worry. Not only do these feelings relate to our incarcerated loved one, they can relate to others in our life as well. We may begin to think that with all that we are going through, that we have somehow neglected or spent less time with others that need and depend on us, such as children, family, and friends.

This is a time when helpful cooperation and kind words go a long way toward helping us feel better. The second type of depression associated with mourning is sometimes less noticeable to others, and is often more of a private way that we prepare ourselves for, and deal with, the separation from our loved one.

5. Acceptance

Some of us make it to this stage of mourning, while others do not. Our situation may come about suddenly or unexpectedly. We may never be able to get beyond our anger and denial. The acceptance phase is evidenced by withdrawal and calm. While this is not a period of happiness necessarily, neither should it be confused with depression.

How we cope with loss is a very personal experience. As much as we would like, no one can make the process easier for us, nor can they understand all of the emotions that we experience during that time. We must allow ourselves to feel the grief as it comes over us, as resistance will only cause the natural process of healing take much longer. Others, however, can be there for us and help provide comfort to us during this process, which is what Strong Prison Wives and Families is all about.

Each of us will go through this process in our journey as a prison friend or family member at some point or another; recognizing it is essential. We may go through the grief process more than once. Not only do we have to deal with the initial incarceration, but transfers to other facilities. Even having to leave them there at the end of a visit and go home without them can restart the process all over again. Know that you are not alone. We are in this together. We must hold each other up and provide support and encouragement, especially when the outside world often fails us when we are in this situation. Above all, remember that you are stronger than you think. You can get through this. It may not always be easy, but it is NOT impossible.

Straight Talk Support Group Crisis Line: 919-599-5125

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