

LIVING WITH LOSS

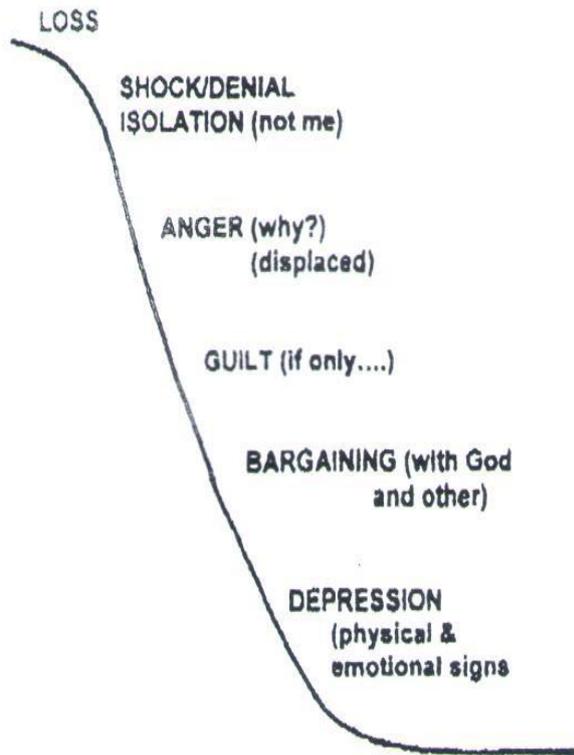
Orientation questions (taken from "Grief and Loss" by Serendipity Support)

1. In your loss, what do you most identify with in these stories?
 - having strange physical reactions
 - feeling out of touch with the world
 - feeling uncomfortable around others, but dreading an empty house
 - the sudden jab of "red hot memory"
 - being tormented by unanswered questions

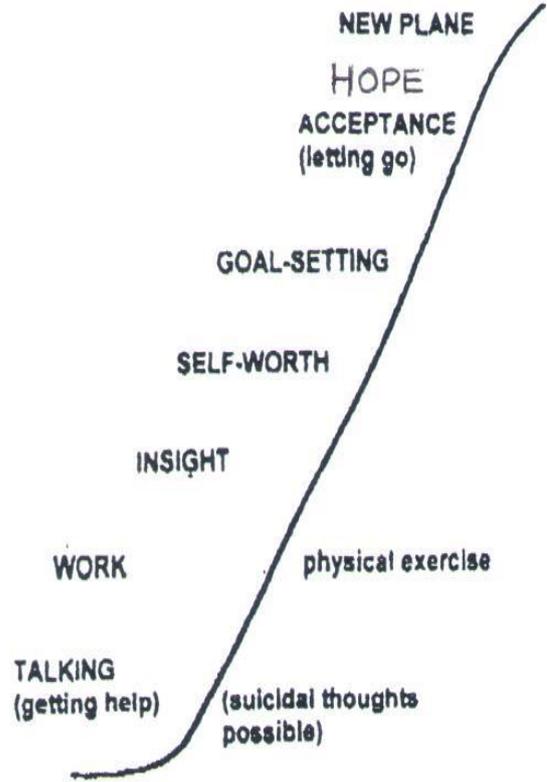
2. What has your experience of God during this time been like?
 - That of CS Lewis - "He's bolted the door"
 - That of Nicholas Walterstorff – He's there, but I still can't fit things together
 - I've become even closer to Him
 - What God?

3. Which of the following best describes the loss that brought you to be part of this group?
 - recent death of a loved one
 - facing a terminal illness
 - physical illness or disability
 - recent divorce or relationship loss
 - serious financial loss
 - death from some time ago
 - loss of job or career
 - other.....

THE GRIEF SYNDROME



RECOVERY



KUBLER-ROSS'S GRIEF SYNDROME

1. Denial

Questions

1. How did you hear about your loss? What are the first things you remember saying and doing?

2. Which of the following behaviours symptomatic of denial have you found yourself engaged in?
 - setting a place at the table (or similar preparation) for someone who has died
 - not crying (or showing distress) till some time after the loss
 - disbelieving the bad news
 - discounting negative feelings voiced by others until the loss was real
 - preserving the room or clothing of the dead person as it was when he/she was alive
 - refusing to talk to a dying loved one about their impending death
 - going ahead with one's regular routine on the day of the loss
 - other

3. How did this behaviour help or hurt as you sought to deal emotionally with the loss?

2. Anger

Questions

1. The two people in these stories directed their anger at many different people. Who is your anger likely to come out against?
 - at God
 - at the medical staff/people involved in your loss
 - at family members
 - at the clergy or “religious types”
 - at yourself
 - at people who ask you about your anger!

2. What do you think is the most important thing for you to do to express your anger in a healthy way?
 - don't let anyone know I am angry
 - tell people I am angry and (to the best of my ability) why I am angry
 - unload my anger on things instead of people
 - apologize when I wrongly hurt someone
 - explore the reasons behind my anger with a trusted friend or group
 - resolve my anger before I become bitter or destructive
 - turn my anger over to God in prayer
 - other

3. Guilt (if only...)

Even when you know you had done everything you could to assist the process, you may wonder if you could have done more. Did he really know that I loved him? Did I visit her often enough? Why did I get angry with X? Maybe if I'd done it differently, he would not have left...

4. **Bargaining** (guilt and bargaining are often experienced simultaneously)

Questions

1. Do you (or did you) ever say, “if only I had....in relation to your loss”? If so, what is it you think you should have or could have done differently?
2. Why do you think we, as grieving people dwell on how it would have been “if only....”?
 - to punish ourselves – as if we don’t already have enough pain!
 - to learn from the situation
 - it’s wishful thinking – if we could only turn the clock back
 - it’s an effort to make sense – to regain control
 - other
3. An alternative to trying to gain control of our lives through bargaining is to trust God’s control. How would you describe your level of trust in God right now?
 - About as much as I trust a politician’s promise
 - I don’t feel I can trust anyone right now
 - I want to trust him, but it’s difficult
 - I am slowly learning to put it all in God’s hands
 - I trust Him completely

5. **Depression**

When the reality of our loss sinks in deeply, we most often enter the stage of depression. This depression can last a short time or it can come and go for years. No one can determine how quickly or how slowly a person will move through depression. But those suffering from depression can do several things:

- Let others into your life. We are not made to be “islands apart to ourselves.” We need others to share feelings with and to help us with practical tasks.
- Keep a journal – it helps with the exploration and expression of feelings.
- Meditate on God’s promises.
- Don’t allow yourself to sink into inactivity. Get involved in some form of service to others, develop a new hobby, etc.
- Don’t try to short-circuit depression in harmful ways, such as through alcohol abuse, overworking, promiscuity, overeating etc.
- Face the fact of your loss squarely in all its pain. Then move your sight from the loss to the future.

The possible symptoms of depression are:

- ❖ depressed mood – sad, empty, tearful (&/or irritation)
- ❖ diminished interest or pleasure in activities that would normally give pleasure
- ❖ loss of appetite (and weight loss) or increase in appetite
- ❖ insomnia (or hypersomnia)
- ❖ physical agitation, restlessness or retardation, sluggishness
- ❖ fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day
- ❖ feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt
- ❖ poor concentration or indecisiveness
- ❖ recurrent thoughts of death or recurrent thoughts of suicide

There may also be lots of minor aches and pains, such as recurring headaches or intestinal pains.

Questions

1. When does the depression from your loss hit you the hardest?
 - at night
 - first thing in the morning when I realize it is not a dream

- when I come home to an empty house
- when I see certain things or visit certain places
- whenever I have to look in the mirror
- when I relive past memories
- when I see someone else who has what I have lost
- other

2. What feeling dominates your down times?

- fear
- anxiety
- apathy
- despair
- loneliness
- sadness
- anger
- other

3. Have you ever had your loss hit you with such force that you nearly “lost it” emotionally?

4. What specific strength do you need right now?

- to “walk and not faint” – to be able to take one day at a time without falling apart
- to “run and not grow weary” – to keep up a hectic life pace while trying to deal with my loss
- to “soar on wings like eagles” – my spirit has been down and I want to soar again

BUT YOU DON'T HAVE TO STAY THERE – THERE IS A TURN IN THE CURVE.

Acceptance

Eventually we do get to the stage of acceptance. Acceptance does not exactly mean “we get over it” as if everything goes back to the way it was before. Rather it means we adapt our life to the reality of our loss and we go on to whatever is next – whether that be developing new relationships, as with divorce or the death of a spouse; or preparing for our own death as a person needs to do who faces terminal illness. Acceptance means that life has shifted from focusing on the past and what has been lost, to focusing on the present and what remains.

Nothing will be the same as before. It can be better though!

Questions

1. Which of the following would come within your definition of “acceptance” as it related to your grief experience? (Whether you are there or not)
 - Resignation to reality
 - Finding new relationships
 - Not suffering any more from the loss
 - Being able to see and experience the joy of the present
 - Converting memories from a painful to a positive thing
 - A return to peace and contentment
 - Not crying about my loss anymore
 - Feeling like myself again
 - Not living in the past

2. What concrete acts do you need to do if you are to put the past behind you and open yourself up more to what the future holds?
 - Take down some pictures
 - Get involved in some enjoyable activities
 - Set some goals for my future
 - Give myself permission to feel better
 - I still need to talk about it more before I can put it behind me

1. Which of the following songs could be your theme song for how you are looking at the future right now?

- “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” (from “The Wizard of Oz”)
- “Somewhere Out There” (from “An American Tale”)
- “Yesterday” (The Beatles)
- “Climb Every Mountain” (from “The Sound of Music”)
- “A Whole New World” (from “Aladdin”)
- “One Day at a Time, Sweet Jesus” (Gospel)
- “Coming Out of the Dark” (by Gloria Estefan)

6. Hope

Hope is not automatic. It has to be cultivated.

Do you remember as a child being told that the circus was in town? Imagine that you are invited to have free lessons in how to perform in a circus act of your own choice. Which would you choose?

- The lion tamer – I want to feel in control of that which I fear
- The clown – I need to laugh and make others laugh
- The ring master _ I want to feel I’m in control
- The trapeze artist – I want to learn how to let go and to catch others and keep them from falling
- The magician – I want to learn how to make some things “disappear”
- The juggler – for once I could keep it all going without “dropping the ball”

- The bareback rider – I want to stay on top of things and do it with grace
- Other

Sometimes it means having to “free fall”, take a leap of faith, believing in the future.

Questions

1. Where are you finding hope right now?
 - The findings of medical science
 - Involvement in an organization
 - The promise of God in Scripture
 - Contemplation of the circle of life and death in nature
 - My growing relationship with Christ
 - The support and encouragement of friends
 - A new personal relationship I have found
 - Other.....

2. JoAnn Kelly Smith compared her experience of dying with a trapeze artist in free fall who is caught by his or her partner. Where are you right now in this trapeze artist analogy?
 - Still standing on the platform, trying to find a way back out
 - Holding on to the trapeze for dear life, refusing to release it
 - Checking to see if there is a “safety net”
 - Wanting to trust and let go, but struggling to make the “leap of faith”
 - In free fall, totally unsure if I will ever be “caught”
 - In free fall, expecting to be caught
 - Feeling like I’m already safely in the hands of my God.

PAST LOSSES

We need to acknowledge past losses as they are often reawakened by a succeeding loss. It may depend on whether the previous loss has been resolved and accepted.

If you have been unwilling or unable to work through the present loss, the feelings may be aroused again when you suffer another loss, even years from now.

Exercise

Discuss a past loss and how you dealt with it. Does it touch the loss that you are presently experiencing? If you find it too difficult to discuss, this may mean that the past loss is not resolved.

WHAT IF YOU ARE JUST UNABLE TO MOVE ON TO THE PLACE OF ACCEPTANCE?

GRIEF GOING WRONG

Other words that one can use to describe grief going wrong are – inappropriate, pathological, complicated, stuck, unresolved, abnormal, unhealthy grief.

Generally it is best to go by one's gut feeling when one is worried about the bereaved one, especially some months, or even years after the loss.

The following definition by Horowitz may help you to decide whether or not the individual (or yourself) is suffering from unresolved grief:

“The intensification of grief, the level where the person is overwhelmed, resorts to maladaptive behaviour or remains interminably in the state of grief without progression of the mourning, with no process towards completion. It involves processes which do not move progressively towards assimilation or accommodation and instead lead to stereotyped repetitions or extensive interruptions of healing.”

It is also sometimes called “chronic grief”. Barbara Monro describes it as

“The continual expression of reaction, thoughts or feelings which are appropriate to a very early stage of grief.”

E.g. 6 or even 12 months later the person is expressing constant anger, or is still searching in the crowd for the face of the dead or lost one. It is often expressed by the bereaved person as “not being able to get back to living”. In other words, it is a prolonged and excessive duration of grief.

INDICATORS

These are some things to look for:

1. Concerning the loss itself

1.1. Whether the loss was expected.

Were you prepared, were you present if it was a death, and did you want to be present?

1.2. In the case of a death or the end of a relationship, was it perceived as peaceful? (Often it was peaceful, but is perceived otherwise)

1.3. In the case of a death or the loss of a body part, was the diagnosis understood? (Or in the case of other loss, were the circumstances understood?)

Generally, the violent, sudden, multiple death (or leaving) or one in which there is no body, is the most difficult and the most traumatic for those left behind.

What other losses or factors do you think make it difficult to move on?

If you are trying to help someone whom you believe is suffering from chronic grief, don't assume, check it out.

2. Who is left behind? Dependency and vulnerability are important factors. E.g. a dependent wife who is left with a business to run or who has no idea how to pay accounts etc. Children are obviously dependent and can feel very afraid when they lose a parent or significant adult.

3. Have there been any other important losses within the recent past, such as a death, loss of a job, a divorce, burglary, miscarriage, moving home, financial loss? (Reawakening of emotions)
4. Is the grieving person in good health? One is more susceptible to chronic grief if one is physically unwell and also more susceptible to further ill health.
5. Is the grieving person on medication for depression or anxiety? Or does he use a lot of other types of medication or alcohol? These may be signs that he is not coping with the loss.
6. Does the person suffer from a psychiatric illness, e.g. depression? This could make it even more difficult to recover from the loss.
7. How well does the person handle separation from a loved one or from home? A loss for this individual may be felt as overwhelming. Often the dependent person finds it more difficult to move on as this may involve becoming more independent.
8. Does the person seem to be experiencing an excessive amount of guilt or anger a long time after the loss? Are one or both of these emotions an overwhelming feature of this person's life?
9. Has the person expressed suicidal intent or even the wish to be dead? Even if this was in the past, prior to the loss, it could make it more difficult to come to terms with the loss.
10. How much emotional support does the person have in the form of family and friends who are really there for him? It may be that this support does exist but he does not perceive it to be so, so feels very alone and not understood.

11. In the case of a death, the manner of illness and how it affected the dying person may play a role in not being able to accept the death. E.g. If the illness was long and painful and the carer found it difficult and stressful. Or perhaps the illness changed the physical appearance or the personality of the dying one. These facts may cause the grieving person to feel extreme guilt or may make it difficult to let go.
12. Are there financial problems?
13. Are there any legal implications? E.g. a death may involve a police investigation or a car accident may involve a court case. A divorce may involve a custody dispute. Any legal action may complicate the matter.
14. Is the bereaved person actually asking for help? He may have contemplated seeking professional help or mentioned the need to obtain medication.