



“How do I help someone...

...cope with loss, and who is bereaved?”

Loss is a universal experience. Throughout our lives, we all suffer losses of one kind or another. Some losses are devastating, others are expected, but all take a toll on our emotions and challenge us to establish an equilibrium that incorporates that experience.

Our loss experience is also a unique one. Because each of us is a unique mix of personal qualities and past experience, we cannot know how another person feels about their particular loss, even when it seems that their loss is similar to ours. We are not the same; our sense of our loss is not the same. Paradoxically, the inevitable, universal experience of loss is a solitary one: we face our suffering on our own – no person can deliver us or heal us or alter the pain in us.

However, keeping the uniqueness of each individual’s experience in mind, our common experience of loss may, with God’s help, bear in us the fruit of compassion for one another and encourage us to find comfort in sharing our personal experiences with fellow-sufferers who really do care.

Different Kinds of Loss

The loss that most readily comes to mind is the death of a spouse or child or parent or friend. Such a loss can be devastating, especially when tragic or unexpected, and when the relationship has been close. Sometimes we are left with many regrets.

Other losses also cause deep heartache. Some of these are:

- Loss of health or physical or mental ability,
- Loss of relationship and role through divorce, separation, or empty nest,
- Loss of trust as a result of some kind of abuse,
- Loss of work through ill health, retrenchment or retirement,
- Loss of faith,
- Loss of friends, comfort, lifestyle etc. Through migration or moving house,
- Loss of a pet,
- Unfulfilled dreams due to a host of circumstances such as illness, failure in exams, inability to find a partner, infertility, our children choosing not to embrace our faith, etc.

Some of these losses evoke a universally sympathetic supportive response from people around us.. Other losses such as divorce, persistent unemployment, chronic illness or disability have aspects that can alienate people. For example, divorce sometimes results in people taking sides, and this divides the

support network, diminishing the resources available to each of the individuals. Illness and disability can be very frightening and some people, even though they care, do not know what to say. Feeling scared and vulnerable, they find themselves unable to reach out. Some losses, such as miscarriage, sexual abuse and infertility, are very private, and are borne without the support of others.

The nature of the loss, our social circumstances, our past experiences and our physical and emotional resources affect the way we experience the pain, and the kinds of adjustments we need to make to integrate the loss situation into our lives.

The Nature of Grief

Grief is the human response to change and loss in our lives. The experience of grief is an emotional wound that requires time for healing. Recovery from grief is a process, not an act of will. We can't just decide to "get over it". Patience and gentleness are needed – with ourselves and with others.

Physical distress is a common occurrence, often with changes in sleep patterns, and/or fatigue. Eating habits can be altered – some people eat more, others eat less. We may find that we are unable to concentrate, so that leisure activities, such as reading or even watching TV, are not possible. Even worse, our work patterns can be disturbed.

Emotional distress can show itself in crying, fearfulness, panic attacks and diffuse anxiety. Sometimes there can be a preoccupation with the person or situation that is lost and we may become stuck in regret. As time passes, we struggle to accept the reality of the loss situation.

It is important to understand that our experience of grief bears no relationship to our degree of faith. Grief is experienced by the faithful as often and as deeply as by unbelievers. For the believer, there is solace in knowing that God is with us in our suffering, that He cares for us in all our troubles, that "nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). God knows that we will experience grief deeply – after all, we are His creation and He has revealed to us his own sense of sorrow. Many of His people experienced profound sorrow – Eve, Job, David, and our Lord Jesus Christ, who is described as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3).

Phases of Grief

Understanding the various reactions that grieving can produce may help us cope with our own or with another's passage through this painful time.

For most people, there is the initial shock, followed by disbelief and denial. As the reality of the loss is absorbed, a period of anger often follows, anger at the person responsible for our pain, anger at God for allowing this to happen, at ourselves for feeling as we do, at life for dealing us such a blow.

Anger gives way to great sadness and depression, sometimes along with loneliness, helplessness and anxiety. In the despair and emptiness we feel, we may turn to our faith and find help in prayer and in the writings of scripture, eg. Psalms 13, 23 and 71, and in contemplation of the sorrows others have borne.

Eventually, however, resignation and acceptance come into the situation. The changed reality causes new patterns to emerge. We make adjustments to relationships and living arrangements and we learn

new skills. Wisdom and understanding can be the fruits of our experience of pain, offering us spiritual insight and compassion for others.

These “phases” are not necessarily sequential. Sometimes several feelings are experienced simultaneously, which can be very disturbing. Not every one passes through every phase, and the depth and duration of each emotion is different for everyone. Some people will experience these feelings only fleetingly; Each person has his/her own style and timetable of grief.

How do we best comfort one another?

Our usual gestures of care and sympathy are cards and letters, sometimes visits or practical help like food or transport. These are usually very much appreciated in the initial phases of grief. However, this surge of support usually ends as quickly as it began. Hopefully, for each of us, there are one or two people who are willing to have their lives altered because of our need, who are prepared to make a real and lasting difference to our experience of loss. These are the people who will listen patiently to us as we live through our grief to get to that final phase of acceptance. They will be there for us, whether we are up or down, for however long it takes.

If we want to provide real and lasting support for grieving friends, we must realise that it involves the willingness to give emotional energy. In deciding to do this, the following points might be helpful. To help another, we need to:

- Understand that denial and anger are normal and necessary reactions to loss.
- Allow the person to talk about the loss, to remember the person who is gone, the situation that is no more. Do not discourage weeping which can bring relief.
- Understand that advice does not really help – silence can be more caring and more healing.
- Refrain from exhortations to ‘be strong’ or to ‘see the positive side of it’.
- Avoid preaching that ‘It’s God’s will,’ and quoting Bible verses. The effect of doing this is to reinforce the sufferer's sense of isolation by seeming to diminish or dismiss the emotional upset.
- Find strength for ourselves to support the other throughout the whole mourning process, knowing that the sufferer’s life will never be the same again, and that throughout his/her life, feelings of sorrow and pain will surface again and again.
- Try to understand the experience that is uniquely theirs, and in doing so, provide the profound relief that results from being attentively listened to.

Becoming involved in the healing process of another person in such a positive way, may enhance our understanding of the impact of the loss experience and increase our spiritual awareness. We may find that we ourselves are changed, caring more authentically for those who suffer, loving more deeply and in this way fulfilling the law of Christ. We may find our hearts opening to learn more about God and His great love for us. (1 John 3:1 - 3.)

Finding Meaning in our Loss

The full title of Gerald Sittser’s book, *A Grace Disguised, How the Soul grows through Loss*” indicates his perception of an unexpected positive outcome of the loss experience. It is a remarkable story of the author’s struggle to find some meaning for himself in his own experience of devastating loss. He

encourages us to take our loss experience into ourselves, to be brave enough to face our feelings, to accept them. Acceptance of our loss allows us to be enlarged by it, enabling our souls to grow.

The experience of loss challenges all of us. There are choices to be made as we progress through the stages of healing. We can choose to have our understanding and our spiritual awareness expanded, to make our way, however falteringly, closer to God. In this process, our faith is tested, as Peter says, “the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which, though perishable, is tested by fire”, so that it may redound to praise and glory and honour at the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:17).

There is comfort in realising we have a Saviour who knows our sorrows and the Lord God, our Father, being aware of the fall of a sparrow, continually reaches out to us, his children, in mercy and love. “Let us then, with confidence, draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

Compassion may then become part of our response to loss enabling us to minister to others' needs when they are most vulnerable. Paradoxically, our experience of loss may serve to help us to be “filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:9-10).

References

Sittser, Gerald: A Grace Disguised, 1995. Zondervan Publishing House.

Suggested Reading

McKissock, M., And McKissock, D.: Coping with Grief, ABC Books, 2001:

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