
Grief and Loss

Hello, my name is Louise and today I'm looking at an exploration of grief and loss. My tertiary background is in psychology and I've always had an interest in personal relationships. **There seems to be more and more need for specialist care as relationships break down in our society.**

In my Diploma of Counselling I specialised in grief and loss because grief seems to be something that happens to all of us at some stage in our lives and it is an experience that is part of our human existence. My own experiences in grief and loss have caused me to really address a lot of big questions in life and I still don't have easy answers, although maybe more understanding than I did. My current position as Pastoral Care Coordinator at the Toowoomba Hospice means I experience others' loss and grief on a daily basis.

A couple of definitions. **Loss.** Loss is produced by an event which is perceived to be negative by the individuals involved and results in long-term changes to one's social situations, relationships or thinking.

It is being deprived of a highly valued object or person. **A loss event requires that some part of the individual be left behind** and grieved for before the process of transition and building can occur. Grief is a normal and natural reaction to loss, especially the loss of someone or something held dear, in which the person has invested something of themselves.

It is a deeply human and personal experience. **Grief is an emotional response to loss which can be expressed in a diverse number of ways.** Physical, psychological, behavioural, social and spiritual.

We'll explore these a little later. While there are common patterns in the grief process, there is no one way for it to happen. Each person is unique and situations differ, therefore each person will grieve in their own way.

Grief is hard work. It is not a process of forgetting but being able to remember without the gut-wrenching pain. The process is mostly private and at times a lonely existence.

Grief is a healing process that needs to be worked through for a person to come to terms with the loss. There is the potential for personal growth but also the possibility of personal deterioration. This talk is mainly considering the loss of a person but I wanted to draw your attention to other losses which can also result in grief.

There can be physical loss, for example the loss of a hair or teeth. There can be functional loss, for example loss of function through stroke or infertility. There can be psychological loss, it can be loss of memory but also loss of control or status or independence or self-esteem and some of these might become apparent through retirement.

There can be a social loss, loss of roles through employment or divorce or friendship changes. There could also be community and cultural loss, for example when immigration occurs there is a grief by leaving the native country behind. We can also experience loss of external items, for example money or property as a consequence of robbery or natural disasters.

There can be gains as well as losses in any changes. There are primary and secondary losses, for example the loss of a person can also mean the loss of a number of other things in your life and multiple losses can also cause great depth of grief, especially if grief from one loss has not been suitably faced and worked through, for example the loss of two parents in a short space of time. I'd like to talk now about different reactions to loss.

The first one is physical reactions. These are some examples of what could be experienced, trouble breathing, headaches, crying, appetite changes, susceptibility to colds, fatigue, gastrointestinal issues, sleep disturbances, muscle weaknesses or aches, lack of coordination and physical strength. Psychological reactions could include irritability, agitation, anger, deep sadness, feeling lonely and empty, guilt, shock, denial, bitterness, disappointment, frustration, anxiety, feeling overwhelmed, moodiness, confusion and despair.

Behavioral reactions could include forgetfulness, loss of concentration and slowness of thinking, withdrawing socially, loss of work efficiency, arguments, family difficulties, inability to carry out normal tasks, preoccupation with memorabilia of the lost person, difficulty in organizing the day. Social reactions could include changes in family dynamics, resentment, feeling of not belonging and loss of friendships. Spiritual, the meaning of life could be questioned, beliefs and values questioned and faith tested.

We can see that there are many different reactions that we could have as a result of our grief and it can easily be seen as overwhelming. There are various numbers of models of grief and I'll just mention one today. The Kubler-Ross theory is that people work through the stages of shock, denial, anger, bargaining and depression before acceptance of the loss and grief is processed.

But this process may not necessarily be in that order. Grief is a messy progress, there could be some acceptance but then there could be the traveling back to an earlier phase of acute and intense grief. I'd like to mention my bereavement phone calls.

In addition to being a presence at the Toowoomba Hospice for a large number of people, I also make phone calls to all of our families after the loss of a family member. I make at least five phone calls across the first year after the death. The first is within a couple of days, then at one month, three months, six months and 12 months.

At the immediate phone call a variety of emotions can be expressed. Strong emotion can be evident, there might also be anxiety about what to do next, sometimes there is relief at the

end of the suffering of the loved one but also at the same time great sadness. Often I hear an expression of gratitude to those who have cared for the family in recent days and weeks.

Sometimes I hear the person that I'm calling has just had the best sleep in weeks. I check that there is some kind of family or friend support, that they have a funeral director or equivalent to be of practical help. There is often a feeling of being overwhelmed and this is where family support is incredibly helpful.

At my one month call I often hear about the funeral or the service and usually that's a very positive conversation. There is appreciation of those who came to the funeral or sent cards and flowers or have showed thoughtfulness in other ways. However the death certificate usually arrives around then too which can cause more emotional turmoil and another reminder of the finality of losing someone.

At three month call there is talk of functional things like possibly trying to get back to work or to other events, dealing with accounts and paperwork, sorting out possessions etc and possible anger at having been left to deal with these things. Sometimes there is complete confusion on how to do things every day at home like pay the bills or dealing with the washing machine or cooking a simple meal because their partner had always done those particular jobs. There is often the comment about how attention from others has dried up as people get back to the reality of their own lives.

At six months there is talk of finalizing belongings and paperwork and usually more functionality although some cannot manage this at this point. It is at this time I feel that if a person is really struggling to move forward in their life I suggest attending our grief and loss support group which we run twice a year at the hospice. It is a program offered by Blue Care in Queensland and it is an eight-week course of two hours each week.

Our team of pastoral carers are all trained to facilitate this course and it is a free service offered by the hospice and it has been of immense value to many. While we cannot take away the grief we provide a situation where there is acceptance and understanding and some practical tools to help the attendees move forward in their life. There is also enormous benefit to being in a small group where the other group members are experiencing a similar situation.

At my 12-month phone call there is often more acute grief at the anniversary but usually a positive discussion on how the anniversary will be spent honouring their loved one. This can involve taking flowers to a memorable place, a trip away, eating a meal with the family, planting a tree in memory of their loved one. After this phone call is when I send a card and a wooden leaf to the family with the name of the loved persons engraved on it as a gift from the hospice.

That is the end of my direct contact with the family but that is not to say that their grief is over and done with. There is an understanding and I acknowledge this in my last phone call

that they are free to contact me at any time. There is no neat and tidy way of going through grief.

I frequently hear of the good days and bad days at any time from anyone. **There are milestones along the way which can trigger big reactions for example their loved one's birthday, Christmas time or finalising belongings or properties.** I talk with families about what they can do on the bad days.

Overall when I connect with family members I try to support the person in finding their purpose in life. This can be different each time I ring. What is going to be their purpose today? It might simply be getting out of bed, having breakfast and going for a short walk.

It doesn't have to be a large task. What do they hope to achieve this week, this weekend or in the month ahead? There is often talk of travel or visiting family. Interacting with others is also important.

Finding a new activity stretches their courage but also provides a new interest in their life and is rewarding to hear about. My understanding of grief is that it is a very huge and complicated process. It involves so many different aspects of your life so it is important to recognise it in yourself as well as being supportive to others when they are going through it.

So we need to recognise that grief is a very real condition and cannot be ignored or glossed over. We need to be able to manage ourselves and our time. Being distracted and finding things to keep us busy is not always a good thing.

We need to allow ourselves time and space to grieve. It is hard work. There is support for us if we choose to accept it but this can require courage and also needs to be at the right time for us.

We cannot experience a relationship loss without losing an integral part of and sense of who we are. A major component of the grief process involves letting go of a former identity, grieving that part of you which has gone forever and rebuilding a new identity. It is tricky to face the reality that life is not going back to normal.

It is finding and accepting what the new normal is. I will now just go through a few strategies to help yourself if and when you are going through the grief process. Firstly, learning to accept what is and to find the meaning in the loss.

And this is easier said than done of course. This will possibly depend on personality type and how one has dealt with blows in the past. The concept of resilience is important.

Being prepared to face emotional pain and not avoid it is another strategy. This takes emotional maturity. It is impossible to ignore grief.

It will pop up throughout our life if we don't address it. Another strategy is being mindful of our own thoughts and actions and engaging in activities that might help us to do this better. For example, meditation or yoga or even something like colouring in and jigsaws.

It is important to learn to pace ourselves and our activities and don't expect too much of ourselves too early. We need to give ourselves time as grief can be overwhelming. We can ask, help or talk to a trusted friend, someone who will listen and not offer advice or be judgmental.

It is important to have a plan for dealing with stress. For example, learning breathing exercises and learning relaxation. These can be a helpful daily exercise in addition to being useful in a more stressful situation.

For some it may be walking or running. It is good to get into a daily routine by taking care of ourselves with diet, exercise, sleep, usual medical appointments and to avoid self-medicating as in the long term this will cause more harm. Another strategy is called journaling - getting the thoughts and feelings out from within us to be outside of us by documenting it in a written form. We can find ways to continue the relationship with our loved one, although it will be in a different way of course. We can write them letters, we can organise photographs, we can find a favourite place to talk to them, we can honour them in creative ways including including them at the seat at the table or creating a little garden space of their favourite plants.

We can listen to their music, visit their grave if they have a grave or visiting favourite places that you shared together or eating favourite foods on milestone dates. Another good idea is to create a family scrapbook with entries from all members. Joining a support group as I mentioned previously is good as it provides comfort knowing that you are not walking this learning journey all on your own.

If you don't wish to join a support group then being involved with others in some way is very helpful. For example, coffee morning with friends, joining an exercise group, joining a choir. It is important to not make major life changes in the first six months to a year after a significant loss.

It is good to express thankfulness. Having a representation to see all the good things that you still have in your life couldn't be very helpful. For example, having a gratitude diary or a poster on your wall with post-it notes to list all the things that you're grateful for each day.

In time it may be appropriate to give back to society e.g. organising a fundraiser or volunteering for an appropriate cause that's dear to your heart or forming a support group of your own. And finally, there is professional help out there if you choose to seek it. There are many resources starting with your GP and another one to mention today is Grief Australia.

I'd also like to mention some strategies in helping others in their grief. There is difficulty and fear in knowing what is the best thing to say or do and maybe there is worry about saying the wrong thing. It is important to be sensitive and to know the person well.

When my visits and phone calls are undertaken at the hospice, I'm attuned to when they might want to visit or how long they might want to talk. That is their choice and I respect that. Sometimes it's not at all.

The fact that they know I'm available if they need contact is important. The measure of success is not how long I'm with them. Sometimes a smile or a wave from the door is my all that they need on a particular day.

I think the most important thing is to let the bereaved person know that they are being thought of and that doesn't have to be in person. It could be a text or a card or a small gift or a meal. Being regular in contact is important.

I often hear at the three-month calls how the contact from others has dried up as family and friends get on with their own lives and this can isolate the bereaved person. The family member may not necessarily want to talk but just by being there and available is good. However, sitting in silence is difficult for us.

There is an urge for us to say something so be mindful of this and try to resist it. Taking the time is what is important even if we just sat with them and watched a television show. I find there is some value in a short reading or a prayer if the person is welcoming of this.

Lengthy exhortations are not required. Presence, understanding and sometimes the comfort of touch for another living person means a lot.

I'll just give a couple of examples of things not to say or do. Phrases such as, well he lived to a good age and had a good life, or at least you've got other children, or I know exactly how you feel, or keep busy and don't dwell on what has happened, or there will be another opportunity for a partner or a child. All these things are not helpful. Not being judgmental on how the grief is being expressed is very important.

I hear of unusual things that a person does and they confide to me private thoughts and actions that they may not be able to share with others and it's important for me to acknowledge what they are doing to help themselves is very good no matter what it is. We can also help the bereaved find ways to honour the person's memory if they are finding that hard and don't know how to do it. I recently had one person who said to me on our 12-month phone call, please tell me what others do so I can get some ideas of how I can honour my loved one on the anniversary.

And finally it is good to understand that grief might be triggered by certain circumstances and it is good for us to be understanding and compassionate when that happens. So this is a very big topic for only 20 minutes but hopefully this has provided a little further

understanding and for you to explore ideas further. My own thoughts is that grief is part of our human existence and it will be hard to avoid.

It is not an easy part of our existence but it gives us depth to our lives and provides an opportunity to know ourselves better and also to be more compassionate and understanding of others. Thank you for watching.

Louise Buttsworth
