Normal & Complicated Grief

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Definitions

- Bereavement - the objective event of loss caused by the death of someone significant.
- Grief - a person’s total response (emotional, spiritual, physical and social reactions) to the event of the loss.

Definitions

- Mourning - the outward acknowledgment of the loss, usually reflecting the practices of one’s culture (grief gone public).

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- Grief Work - the cognitive process of confronting the reality of the death of someone significant and the impact of loss.

Definitions

- Reconciliation - a renewed sense of energy & confidence felt by the grieving person together with the understanding of how they have been forever changed by the loss.
  The act of adjusting to the new reality caused by the loss.
FIVE IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES OF GRIEF

• #1: Grief is the natural response to loss.

• #2: Emotions experienced during grief are neither good nor bad. They just are.

• #3: Grief emotions will be dealt with ...now or later.

• #4: Grief is an individualized experience. Everyone does not grieve in the same way. There are no predictable stages or levels.

• #5: Grief will not always be like it is in the beginning. As time passes the grief experience & the mourner change.

MYTHS ABOUT GRIEF

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• Grievers are best left alone to grieve.

• Giving into grief and its emotions is being self-centered or selfish.
• Grief can finally end.
• Individuals must grieve in appropriate ways and places.

• Grief is an emotional reaction.
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• People just grieve loss caused by deaths.

MYTHS ABOUT GRIEF

• Loss is a perfect opportunity to teach important lessons about life, death, sin & punishment, faith and eternal rewards.

MYTHS ABOUT ELDER GRIEF

• Crying every day or for an extended time displays that you are not handling the death well. On the other hand, not crying enough shows the mourner’s lack of emotional investment in the relationship.

MYTHS ABOUT ELDER GRIEF

• The best way to get over the death is to become busy so you will not think about it.
MYTHS ABOUT ELDER GRIEF

• You should not experience loneliness. Therefore, you should start dating with the intent of remarrying. Living by yourself is less desirable than being married to another person.

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• If you had a loving and fulfilling relationship with your spouse, you will be less likely to want to remarry.
• After your spouse’s death you are obligated to only live by carrying out his/her wishes. In this type of behavior, you honor your spouse.

Normal Reactions to Grief

• Grief affects the whole person. It is a natural, appropriate, loving human response to loss that impacts the person mentally, physically, socially, emotionally and spiritually. People experiencing loss often notice that they are so radically changed that they feel like they are going crazy. In reality they are experiencing common responses to loss.

Normal Reactions to Grief

• Psychic Numbing - a diminished capacity for feeling all kinds of emotions.

Symptoms: apathy, withdrawal, lethargy, memory loss & confusion.
This reaction is usually referred to as shock. Shock/denial serve a purpose in grief.

Normal Reactions to Grief

• Psychomotor retardation - a slowing down of thought and a reduction of physical movements in a person.
Normal Reactions to Grief

• **Lethargy** - a physical or mental inertness. Lethargy implies such drowsiness or aversion to activity as is induced by disease, injury, or drugs.

Normal Reactions to Grief

• **Apathy** - a state of indifference, where an individual has an absence of interest or concern to certain aspects of emotional, social, or physical life.

Normal Reactions to Grief

• **Anhedonia** – the technical term for the inability to experience joy in life. This includes the inability to find pleasure in normally positive life events such as eating, exercise, & social interaction.

Most Americans live their lives as if death and grief are optional.

The result of this lifestyle often leads to complications in mourning the loss of a loved one.

Complications of grief can result whenever there is unreconciled grief, a delay in the process of mourning or a grief response that persists over time.

Personal Factors That Hinder Mourning

• **Denial** is a defense mechanism that protects mourners from uncomfortable, painful grief emotions. Denial gives the mourner a break from grief, but an extended period of denial hides the mourner from reality and the acknowledgment and expression of grief emotions.
Personal Factors That Hinder Mourning

- **Running from grief** is keeping busy or filling your life with other interests to escape the reality of the loss and the impact it has on your life. The problem with running is that when you stop to rest, the grief and its impact are still there.

- **Suppression** is “stuffing your feelings,” “keeping a stiff upper lip,” “staying strong for others” or other action in which we do not allow ourselves to express or cope with the powerful emotions resulting from the loss of a valuable person. Delayed grief emotions may come out in destructive ways.

- **Avoiding grief** is refusing to deal with those things that remind us of our loss. Extreme avoidance can cause mourners to withdraw from people, places and things that were once of great interest, but are now just painful reminders of our loss.

Cultural Factors That Hinder Mourning

- **Our culture is death & grief denying.** People do not like to talk about or be reminded of the harsh realities of death, dying and grief. Therefore, we are not prepared for the inevitable. We are also not prepared to minister to the dying or the bereaved. They make us feel uncomfortable.

- **Our culture has become distanced from death, dying & grief.** Due to technical advances, life expectancies are longer and the care of the dying and dead is turned over to professionals. Therefore when death strikes close to us, our lack of experience with death and grief leaves us ill-prepared to cope with a loss.

Types of Complicated Grief

- **Absent Grief**
  No apparent feelings of grief are expressed. Denial or psychic numbing is understandable in early grief, but a continued inability to feel grief emotions due to blocking can & does result in emotional and physical turmoil for the mourner.
**TYPES OF COMPLICATED GRIEF**

- **Distorted Grief**
  One or more of the normal expressions of grief becomes distorted stopping the mourner from progressing & experiencing other aspects of grief. An example: the mourner keeps himself/herself so angry that other feelings such as loss, sadness, hurt or vulnerability are not acknowledged. Usually anger or guilt are distorted. The person becomes stuck in his/her grief.

- **Converted Grief**
  The mourner experiences distress which he/she does not connect to his/her loss & grief. An example: the mourner experiences psychosomatic, physical ailments & he/she spends time & energy treating these symptoms rather than addressing the grief. Converted grief is many times an unconscious response to protect the mourner from scary emotions.

- **Chronic Grief**
  The person has a persistent pattern of intense grief that does not result in helping the person move toward grief reconciliation. The mourner’s focus is totally on the loved one, valued objects of the loved one, and depressive brooding. Often mourners stay in intense chronic grief believing that “moving on” would be disrespectful of the loved one’s memory.

**COMMON GRIEF COMPLICATORS**

- Complicators related to the death itself
- Complicators related to the mourner’s traits/coping skills

**Complicators related to the death itself**

- The timing of the death
- The age & relationship of the loved one who dies
- The mode of death
- Any ambiguity surrounding verifying the death
- Conditions causing the inability of the mourner to say goodbye or resolve problems in his/her relationship with the loved one
- Conditions causing the mourner to feel responsible for the death of the loved one
Complicators related to the mourner’s traits/coping skills

• Unreconciled grief from earlier losses
• A tendency to depression or a history of inability to cope well with crisis
• A tendency to avoid expressing any emotion that is uncomfortable
• Self esteem problems or a tendency to assume guilt for anything that goes wrong in the mourner’s life

Complicators related to the relationship

• Being overly dependent upon the loved one
• Intense ambivalence in the mourner’s feelings about the loved one
• Unfinished business
• An overwhelming reliance that demands the mourner “keep the loved one alive” rather than learning to live without their physical presence

Complicators related to an inability to express feelings

• A closed family system which will not allow grief & “negative” emotions
• A low tolerance for uncomfortable & overwhelming emotions & the pain of loss
• Multiple losses or a long history of unreconciled loss
Complicators related to an inability to express feelings

• Changes in the mourner’s life that do not allow time for grief & its emotions
• Delayed grief
• The lack of ritual or customs that usually initiate the grief process
• Pressure from others to be “appropriate” in grieving

Complicators related to an inability to express feelings

• Excessive use of drugs &/or alcohol that suppress feelings
• Extreme isolation after the death or during grief
• An extracted promise from the loved one that survivors will not grieve or be sad after his/her death

Complicators related to an inability to express feelings

• The excessive use of the mourner’s time & energy in developing an environment that allows the mourner to deny the loss
• Going back to work & life as usual without taking appropriate & needed time to acknowledge the impact of the loss

"There is no love without loss. And there is no moving beyond loss without some experiencing of mourning. If we don’t (mourn), we carry our grief into the future. That grief will manifest itself in unexpected ways."

Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D.
Director, Center for Loss & Life Transition
Author, "Living In the Shadow of the Ghosts of Grief"

The Effects of Carried Grief

• Difficulties in trust & intimacy (a history of failed relationships)
• Depression & a negative outlook
• Anxiety & panic attacks
• Psychic numbing & disconnection from others & life
• Irritability & agitation

The Effects of Carried Grief

• Substance abuse & addictions
• Eating disorders
• Physical problems (both real & imagined)
"Unattended sorrow narrows the paths of our lives."

Stephen Levine
Counselor and Author
“Unattended Sorrow: Recovering From Loss & Reviving the Heart”

Six Reconciliation Needs of Grievers

• Acknowledging the reality of the death
Be patient with the person. It may take some time for them to fully accept the reality & full impact of their loss. Follow their lead. Do not try to force them into “getting it together.” Your presence, comfort & attentive listening helps them begin their grief journey. **There is no hurrying grief.**

Six Reconciliation Needs of Grievers

• Embracing the pain of the loss
Honor their story, attitudes & moods by listening without judging. They are sorting through the details of their loss & trying to make sense of what has happened. This requires **being with** the person during this “dark night of the soul.” Expect to feel uncomfortable as you stay with them in their most painful times.

Six Reconciliation Needs of Grievers

• Remembering the person who died
Funerals do not provide closure. The ceremony starts the mourning process. Grievers live in fear that their valued loved one will be forgotten. They need to hear their loved one’s name, to review their memories, & to memorialize in ongoing ways. Again, follow their lead. Let them initiate any methods of keeping the loved one’s memory alive.

Six Reconciliation Needs of Grievers

• Developing a new self-identity
The identity of the griever is grounded in their loved one. They are the loved one’s child, spouse, parent, family member or friend. With the passing of their loved one, they will display confusion & sometimes a “disinterest” in activities or life as they rethink who they are & how they will live without their loved one.

Six Reconciliation Needs of Grievers

• Searching for meaning
When a major loss takes place, the mourner may question the meaning & purpose of life. You may fear they are dwelling too much on the negative by asking “How?” & “Why?” questions. They may even start to question core beliefs such as faith, God & religion. This is a normal part of the grief journey that can lead toward renewed beliefs, faith & hope for the future.
Six Reconciliation Needs of Grievers

• Receiving ongoing support from others
  The griever cannot--& should not--try to go it alone on his/her grief journey. He/she needs compassionate friends who will listen & not judge.
  Don’t try to “cheer them up” or rescue them from their grief.