

Grief -- Part I

THE HARD WORK OF GRIEVING

by [Claudette Coombs](#)

This school year has been a tragic one for many of our colleagues. Not only have we faced illness within our ranks ([The Bulletin; March 1999](#)) but we have also watched helplessly as family and friends have been taken from us through death. In my role with the Employee Assistance Program, I have witnessed the grief and pain associated with loss. These articles attempt to share with you some things which may help each of us move through the pain toward restoring hope on a personal pathway of resilience.

Grieving is a complex process. It encompasses recognition of the impact of a personal loss and management of the subsequent recovery. It brings emotional, psychological, intellectual and behavioural responses to the loss and therefore requires specific recovery action in each of these areas.

We experience grief when someone or something significant has been, or threatens to be, taken away from us. Although we generally associate grief with a loss of life, we also grieve other losses. Examples include: the end of a close relationship; termination of a job; a move to a new town, job or home; or, the loss of personal security. In each case we lose something which is valuable. We are faced with uncertainty, isolation, sadness, confusion and possibly fear. We must adjust to new conditions and rules and may experience a feeling of helplessness or loss of control over our lives.

Intensity

The "bereavement", or sense of loss, is more intense when the loss affects many areas of our lives. We may all have shared in the grief of the families who suffered loss from the Swiss Air disaster in Peggy's Cove. After all, we are part of a universal family experiencing pain and we may relate to the personal devastation of losing a family member. However, we experience more intense feelings when we hear of the death of a friend's child. Why? We interpret the world events according to the relevance to us. We try to protect ourselves and build psychological barriers around our emotions. We acknowledge tragedy and try to console, then we move on with our lives. But, sometimes, emotional acknowledgment of a loss is more than we can bear. When we survive the death of a spouse, child or parent, the psychological pain may be so great that we deny reality or we refuse to continue "living". If this desolation persists, our hope for moving through the hard work of grieving may rely on professional intervention.

Mourning

Mourning allows us to express our anguish and sorrow. We may withdraw, become overwhelmed with emotion, talk continuously, or publicly show the intensity of our sadness in numerous other ways. We may also choose to mourn privately. Unfortunately, the grieving process may outlast the socially recognized mourning period. This poses personal danger when we misinterpret well-meaning comments or behaviours by friends. A statement that 'it is time to get out more and move on with life' may cause us to think that our behaviour is inappropriate. If we then choose to hide our grief, this prevents a natural process of grieving suited to our emotional needs. Although others may feel uncomfortable with a short, or a long, public mourning period, we must not allow our mourning behaviours and grieving process to be dictated by others. Yes, grief can be suppressed but it will inevitably re-emerge. Grief is a very personal experience and can only be properly expressed and resolved in ways which match an individual's personality, experience of loss and subsequent needs.

Complications

The impact of loss varies with individuals and according to many personal factors. These can include: abilities to cope and readjust; anticipation of, and preparation for, the loss; the presence of external supports; and personal expectations for change. As well, the grieving process can become complicated by: personal issues (eg. regret and guilt); or external issues (eg. blame, lack of understanding or support); or environmental factors (eg. family, professional or financial demands).

Any of these factors can lead to problems with adjustment, interference with daily living and ability to achieve future happiness. For many of these complications, we can (alone or with the help of others) rationally reassess the situation and reconcile our thoughts and feelings.

Acquiring the needed support may be only an issue of communication. On many occasions people fail to act because they are unsure of how to help. Open discussion can lead to enhanced understanding and support from those who really care.

Often an objective perspective can assist with defining options to address the demands currently overpowering us.

Expectations

When we know what to expect we are less frightened by the process, even though the pain remains. The physical and emotional reactions can be most acute immediately following the loss and are usually short-term. Physical symptoms may resemble those of shock. Numbness, heart palpitations, chills, nausea, and muscle pain are common. Psychological symptoms may resemble extreme stress. Interference with sleep, activity, eating and socializing patterns; loss of interest in hobbies, pleasure and family; anxiety, confusion and inability to concentrate; withdrawal from, and rejection of, others; and, substantial personality changes may occur. The intellectual processing of the loss over time usually relieves most of these symptoms.

Beware! The emotions and behavioural responses associated with loss can be triggered by spontaneous memories of the past or by naturally occurring events in our daily lives. The emotions can range from overwhelming to mild reminders of what we have lost. However, the debilitating intensity is generally reduced over time --; not because the loss is less significant, nor is it because we replace the memories or treasures of the past, nor is it because we find no place to recognize the loss in our future. Instead, it is because we have learned how to incorporate a new view of a loved one, how to go on living, how to create new and different pleasures, and how to accept that life still has meaning.

Successfully conquering grief depends on being able to progress through a series of indicators. Although they may be achieved in different order and may be cycled through repeatedly, they include: accepting the reality of the loss; recognizing its pervasive impact; expressing the intensity of the pain; creating a new and different place for the loved one; finding new avenues to meet personal needs; and looking to the future without a sense of dread but instead with a sense of hopefulness.

To explore "TOOLS FOR RECOVERY", read the follow-up article: [Grief Part II: Continuing the Work of Recovery](#).

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