

Grief --; Part II

THE WORK OF RECOVERY

by [Claudette Coombs](#)

Living with loss has become a routine part of our existence. Although we experience all the emotions associated with loss we somehow manage to continue functioning and usually are able to reestablish some new meaning to our lives. We learn how to recover and rebuild. Recovery can be a long and difficult process but it will always be an active process. It cannot happen without our deliberate involvement.

Developing an understanding of the loss is a prerequisite to recovery. Loss is a psychological as well as physical, experience. We need to understand what we have lost, the implications on our present and future, and how to manage the pain, sadness and mandatory changes associated with the loss. The magnitude of our emotional or behavioural reaction (whether expressed publicly or held privately) may suggest the significance of the loss. If the loss affects many areas of our lives and involves roles which help us define ourselves, we have serious work to do to ensure recovery.

Understanding Loss

We can easily see the physical loss when we lose a loved one or are subjected to a loss of health. Routines of daily existence will undergo dramatic changes. However, as drastic as these changes are, adjusting to the physical losses can be much easier than accepting and adjusting to the psychological losses. We now have to restructure our thinking, review and alter our expectations and acknowledge that life will never again be as it was. We must develop and incorporate a new definition of "normal".

A key premise to recovery is understanding the concept of loss. It implies that either we had, owned, borrowed or expected something to be ours and now that is no longer a reality. We have been done an injustice, life seems unfair and maybe the world is less complete because of that loss. We see the intensity of these reactions when a community is about to lose a school. We feel the personal tragedy when we give birth to a child who will never be well. We trudge through the anguish when a loved one is removed from us by death. Unfortunately, when we endure loss, we tend to focus only on what has been taken away, rather than also acknowledging what is left. The things remaining are the reasons, and provide the methods, for our recovery.

Tools for Recovery

When we are able to anticipate a loss we can actually begin the recovery process immediately, otherwise we can only begin to respond as the loss happens. Although individuals vary in ability and need we can draw on some commonalities in the recovery process. Because we function on a timeline and because our brains prevent us from dealing with too much at once, we can expect that recovery will occur in at least three different stages: immediate (crisis); short-term (survival); and, long-term (restoration).

The first stage is the immediate response to the shock. This practical, crisis management approach to taking care of immediate necessities often allows us to deny our emotions or deliberately put them on hold. There are details to look after, arrangements to be made and actions to be taken in order to prevent further complications. Sometimes we look back at this stage and either don't remember, or wonder, how we got through it.

Next is the short term handling of details. This is also an approach to practical details but will include facing emotional factors. We have moved to survival mode and are attempting to re-establish routines. There may be need for family and financial adjustments. This requires a plan for doing things differently in the future. But now that the immediate issues have been handled, we have more time to think about the psychological impact of our loss.

In the case of a death or the end of a relationship our dream of life has been stolen forever. The loneliness settles. We may try to fill in some of the gaps by relying on family or friends to listen as we share the pain or as we attempt to reconstruct our lives. We may seek out ways to distract or occupy our minds because we do not want to think about or feel the pain. But the pain is inevitable. By now we have already confronted and modified most of the physical demands in our altered lives. We have rearranged routines and made numerous adjustments to cover the new demands. But the pain remains. Family and friends can help to fill some of the gaps while we begin a process of creating a new place in our lives to keep the loved one close. Some things we can do to deal with the acute loneliness and sense of loss include:

- create new traditions that recognize the loved one's contribution to your life;
- use birthdays or anniversaries to celebrate the good memories;
- write a letter or carry on a conversation with the loved one;
- keep pictures or treasures in a special place;
- schedule a time and place to "remember";
- include new people and activities in your life.

The routines which have been built into our lives serve as constant reminders of the extent of our loss. By introducing new routines and rituals we provide the opportunity to offer new meaning to the past and allow for a future of personal growth. Some of the pain, sadness and loneliness can be replaced with a gratitude for the happy memories. Because of the learning which occurred in the relationship, the happiness that existed there and the anticipation of future growth can never be stolen by grief. The period of sadness that follows loss is eased somewhat as we progress through the next stage.

We have moved beyond mere survival to the restoration stage when we are able to look at our lives and find new ways to fill the emptiness left by the loss. Now we begin what may be the most intense work of all, the rebuilding of our lives. In the case of a death, we lose someone who may have held many roles and therefore met many of our needs. A spouse is a lover, a friend, a companion, a confidante, a mirror, a true partner. With the loss of a partner we lose so much of ourselves and lose our avenue for meeting so many of our basic and higher level needs. Comfort, intimacy, reaffirmation, sharing, understanding, pleasure, and so much else has been intricately linked with our loved one --; and now that's gone. We survive this loss by finding new ways to meet our needs without losing the memory and the value of our loved one.

Living Again

Although we have experienced losses related to career, relationships, future plans, health or life, we are not left with nothing! We still have treasured memories; we have dreams that we can modify; we have personal strengths that we use to rebuild our lives. Our progress may be slow and at times we may stand still but we are moving toward a new view of reality, a new "normal", by accepting the losses and learning to build on what remains. We are allowing ourselves to heal from the pain and we can experience life again. We don't choose the loss and pain but, for what we have left, we can choose redirection rather than regrets.

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