

COPING WITH LOSS

by Kathy Burford

Teachers are often confronted with situations where they must try to help their students cope with grief and loss. It may be a serious illness or death which has occurred among the student or staff population, and teachers are faced with the task of supporting and comforting others, as well as dealing with their own loss and grief. Outside the classroom, there are different kinds of loss that can occur in a person's personal life such as the ending of a relationship, divorce, illness, loss of income, or the death of a friend or loved one.

The Christmas season, in particular, is one of the most difficult times of year in coping with loss. Perhaps we are reminded more of our losses during this time of year because it is a time when getting together with friends and family occurs more frequently and when people connect on an emotional level; thus, feelings of loss are intensified. If you have experienced a loss, you may feel angry, depressed, guilty, or dissatisfied with your particular situation and find yourself asking, "Why me?". You can learn to cope successfully with loss but it does take time to grieve and eventually get beyond just feeling angry or sad. Perhaps you are not the one experiencing a loss, but someone you know is, and you are wondering what you might do to help support another in coming to terms with their loss and grief.

Different Kinds of Losses

Losses come in many forms. The extent that you feel your pain depends on the meaning you place on what was lost, or the relationship you had if someone who was close to you dies. The loss of a mate or a special friend may mean no longer having the companionship and love of the person with whom you shared so many things over the years. One friend recently remarked that her father's death this past year meant that all the Christmas decorating and the special things Dad did to make Christmas a magical and special time for the family would be deeply missed this year. The family, still dealing with their grief, has decided to spend their holidays away from home this year. If you are coping with illness, you may only begin to really appreciate the time in your life when you were healthy and able to do things that you can no longer do or enjoy. Perhaps the loss is related to one of the many aspects of downsizing or restructuring such as the loss of a job or a change in work responsibilities. Any loss is difficult. Some losses are harder to deal with than others, but loss is a part of life and no one escapes from having to deal with it at one time or another.

Understanding Loss

Any loss, and the grief that accompanies it, confronts us with feelings of helplessness and lack of control over our life. While we often hear that time heals all wounds, time is not our only option. It is what we decide to do with the time that can help the healing process. How do we become whole again, to make our lives full and to find a sense of purpose, when the bottom seems to fall out?

A Time to Grieve

Initially, during the early stages of loss most people feel a sense of shock or numbness. Decisions are hard to make because there is an overall sense of confusion or lack of control. Physical symptoms may include anxiety, nausea, headaches, and a lack of energy. For some, it may be difficult to relax or to slow down. A lot of energy may be used up by keeping busy and active with little sense of completion or satisfaction from the tasks completed. When the numbness begins to wear off, a person might feel like they are on automatic pilot going through the motions outwardly, but feeling the real depth of pain inwardly. With the pain comes a wide range of emotions such as anger, guilt, sadness and grief. You might question whether life will ever be the same again. It may seem like life has come to a standstill and you may feel alone, fearful or misunderstood. All of these feelings are a normal part of grief reactions and they should not be ignored, shunned, stifled or pushed out of our awareness. Instead, once we acknowledge to ourselves what we are feeling, we can then begin to deal with our pain. It is only then that we can truly begin the grieving process. Over time, some degree of loss will always be there, but the feelings will occur with less intensity.

Stages of Grief

The work of Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has identified five stages of loss and grief which can help a person understand the grief process. These are:

1) Denial

You talk and act like the loss never occurred. You say to yourself and others that things aren't really that bad and don't admit that the loss or change has even occurred. "This is not really happening." "I'm strong and this isn't affecting me in any way." "I'm doing just fine."

2) *Anger*

You are angry at everyone and with life in general. "I don't deserve this." "I've been a good person and after all I've done this happens." "It isn't fair and I hate the world." "It must have been something that I did." Blame and self-blame become such a primary focus, that friends and family may start to withdraw their contact because their support is not enough to counteract your bitterness and anger.

3) *Depression*

You feel alone and hopeless and think that life will never be the same. Ongoing, persistent feelings of meaninglessness may stand in the way of a person who is trying to function in daily life.

4) *Bargaining*

You begin to make bargains in your own mind that you hope will make the pain go away or will give you one more chance to change things back the way they were.

5) *Acceptance*

This final stage occurs when you accept the loss for what it is. It is a reality to be lived with and you learn to live your life the best you can under a new set of circumstances.

It is possible for a person to "get stuck" at any one of the first four stages and not be able to come to an acceptance of the loss. If you find yourself "stuck," it may be worthwhile to reach out for professional help with a counsellor who can guide and help you through the grieving process so that you can come to terms with your pain and grief. But it does take time and it is not uncommon for someone to still be grieving over a loss a year or more later. For some, it may take even longer.

Tips for Coping

Talking about loss is an important part of the healing and grief process. Through talking, a person is able to release pent-up feelings, perhaps cry, and to connect emotionally with others.

Share and talk about your loss particularly with close friends and family.

When others offer help (e.g., an outing, taking the youngsters for the day, invitations to visit), accept the offers instead of refusing.

Limit your use of alcohol or non-prescribed drugs that may numb your pain in the short run but cause greater difficulties in the long run.

Be honest with yourself and others. If you hurt or are sad, say so. If you need time to be alone and reflect, say so, but balance your time to be alone with time to be with others.

At some time, when you are ready, find a way to celebrate and share the important aspects of your loss by remembering the person, the job, or the relationship, with people you feel close to.

Tips for Supporting

If you are helping others with their grief, some suggestions for helping are:

Be a good listener.

Avoid giving prescriptive advice or offering clichés.

Respect the person's need to cry, to be angry, and to grieve at their own pace. You do not need to "fix" their feelings.

If the loss is a death, be there for the person not only at the funeral but afterwards as well.

Tell and show the person you care about them through a phone call, card, or through random acts of kindness.

Dr. Rita Freedman in *Overcoming Loss: A Healing Guide*, provides hopeful advice for anyone struggling with grief. She says, "Every loss is a challenge to grow. Yet growth requires change, which is often very painful. Deciding to heal doesn't mean giving up your dreams or your memories. It does mean deciding not to give up on yourself and your future."

Kathy Burford is an EAP Coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for teachers. For confidential assistance

contact Kathy Burford (Ext. 242), or Claudette Coombs, (Ext. 265).

Note: A booklet entitled "Grief at Work", published by the American Hospice Foundation, is available upon request from the EAP.