



Live Abundantly ... While Managing Loss

by CLAUDETTE E. S. COOMBS

Being alive! What an opportunity filled with endless possibilities! What potential it offers! We can go through life enjoying the blessings of sharing our time with family and friends, seeing the beauty in nature and experiencing the pleasures inherent to our world. We sometimes do this, being completely oblivious to the pain felt by others. We see the joy in life when we are not affected by earthquakes, accidents and cancer, but in a moment that can change. We become part of the community suffering the concomitant ill effects of being alive. Although it may seem so, the world has not changed significantly. However, from our perspective, our tiny segment of the world has changed drastically. Now we are faced with intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual challenges. We must devise a strategy to put the pieces of our world back together – actually long before we are able to plan for recovery, we must accept the loss and believe that we can survive in this new view of normal.

Defining Loss

Losses are cumulative and vary greatly in type and magnitude. In fact, loss has become such a normal part of our daily lives that we may not even recognize many of the losses we encounter. Whether we notice it or not, the collective force can eventually cause significant deterioration to the health of our spirits and our bodies. The impact causes the greatest disruption if the losses are prolonged and affect many aspects of our lives, especially to the stabilizing influences such as our *health, relationships* and *workplace*.

Any challenge to our *health* represents a widespread attack on our capacity to seek additional resources and to recover. We know from experience that if something interferes with our sleep for one night we are more agitated and less tolerant on the following day. If we are dealing with chronic or critical health issues, the impact increases exponentially. Our compromised capacity to negotiate everyday life means that we are less able to maintain balance in

relationships and work and are more susceptible to psychological stress.

A *relationship* challenge takes a different, and possibly more emotional path and may also affect physical health. Whether due to distance, death, divorce or emotional separation, the removal of a significant relationship from our network, will leave us with a gap that requires serious effort for recovery. Each relationship differs from another and often fills a complex assortment of roles. When we suffer from such loss, it is important for us to explore which of these needs is not being met and to identify how we can compensate for those consequent changes. These may be as tangible as companionship or as ambiguous as love, trust and dignity.

Workplace losses are reflected in our ever-changing role within the education system. The teaching climate, facility, location and the staff composition present venues which are vulnerable to change. Losing our job, our familiar position or our respect through mistreatment all have serious implications for the success of our continuous quest to achieve and maintain balance. Enduring verbal abuse by students and parents, insistent demands of an overburdened educational system and frequent changes in duties wreaks havoc with our sense of security. The resulting negative toll of uncertainty accumulates with dangerous potential, unless it is managed and remedied.

How can we prepare?

We can prepare ourselves for the inevitable losses that nature dictates and the losses which occur as a natural part of our life cycle or our environment. We can also prepare for situations which are highly probable, given our specific risk factors. However, there are other situations we cannot reasonably anticipate, therefore our preparation is more general.

Knowledge and understanding are the best tools for effectively handling loss. Knowledge gives us the ability, direction and instruments needed to find the resources for recovery. Understanding allows us

to accept a loss, feel and live through the pain and believe that eventually we will relinquish this hurt for the richness gained through the experience. Don't expect to "forget" the pain or ignore the loss. Not only is this unhealthy, but attempts will be unsuccessful! The pain will surface, maybe triggered by another loss or at a time when you are less able to face the difficulties.

Although we hear of disasters in other countries and feel compassion for those affected, when the loss is personal we are at greater risk of experiencing prolonged difficulty in adjusting to the change and overcoming the pain. Advance preparation and fine-tuning stress management techniques can benefit our healing, since any loss will present a level of stress. Being prepared for the unexpected means cultivating survival skills and maintaining a healthy lifestyle with adequate rest, nutrition, activity, recreation and social contact. We can regularly review our balance in life to ensure that we are in the healthiest state possible. When we recognize gaps, we can improve our condition before being called upon to test our strengths.

How can we manage loss and control its impact?

Damage control is a common strategic planning term when dealing with predictable external crises. If we think of our lives in the same terms we can plan for loss and minimize the impact. By preparing our bodies and minds for trauma we can prevent some of the harm that otherwise would have been caused. Consider the work of engineers in designing a bridge. They don't plan only for normal traffic flow and weather conditions. They calculate the structural challenges of exceptional conditions and build in the extra supports. Likewise, we develop skills and acquire resources to contend with daily stressors. Also, if we are faced with a major, visible loss we usually have access to a great deal of social support, even if it is short term. As friends and colleagues learn of our situation they rally to provide the necessities of daily management in emotional and practical ways. However, if the losses are gradual and almost imperceptible, we are not as likely to automatically receive the same level of encouragement, or if the loss is extreme the available support may seem insufficient. Despite preparation and access to support, we may find that our management process includes a period of time when we are unable to take on normal daily responsibilities. It is then that we must allow others to be part of our recovery. An important note to consider is the difference between individuals who recuperate from adversity and those who succumb to it. Although we each live through various losses in our lifetimes, we respond differently. Some situations

have a greater impact on our daily lives, routines and resources than others. However, we choose how we react. To achieve our maximum quality of life, given our personal limitations and circumstances, we must take mental control over the process. Rather than giving up control so that external events determine how we feel or what we do, we can choose to continue being and doing!

All around us we see and feel the resonance of loss. It is up to us to monitor that impact on our lives, collecting the necessary resources and initiating changes to avoid weighing down our spirits. We have so much to celebrate, so many blessings for which to be thankful ... even in the midst of loss and despair! If we choose not to enjoy life because loss and sadness exist, we lose not only what is beyond our control but we also unnecessarily lose the gifts within our reach.

Claudette Coombs is a Coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for teachers. For confidential assistance contact Claudette Coombs (ext. 242) or Marie Wall (ext. 265).