

Grief & Loss

Loss and grief are integral components of life. Everyone encounters loss in their lives and the inevitable phases of grief and transition which follow. Some losses are minor and adjusting is easy. Other losses are powerful experiences which affect our sense of being, shake our values and challenge life's meaning. The effects of loss are wider ranging with impacts upon physiological, emotional and spiritual functioning. Coping with loss is a diverse and personal experience. Although there are no right and wrong ways of dealing with loss, coping styles may be more or less adaptive for particular individuals. Thus, the aim of this handout is to highlight the nature and process of grief and loss. In addition, unresolved or complicated grief will be discussed.

What is loss?

In a very general sense, loss may be described as any event that involves change. More specifically, the term loss typically refers to a state of being deprived of, or being without something which one once had. Therefore loss occurs when something, or someone is taken from us. Importantly loss situations tend to result from circumstances which are beyond our control. They are generally unchosen and unwelcomed events. Some losses are minor and others are more serious. For instance, whereas losing your car keys may be annoying, losing your job can be disastrous. Perhaps the most impactful loss people encounter is the death of a loved one.

Some common loss situations include:

- Marital separation and divorce (relationship loss).
- Loss of an important person in your life.
- Death of a loved one.
- Injury of a loved one.
- Death of a pet.
- Loss of a treasured object.
- Loss of an ideology, symbol or cause.
- Loss associated with growth into another developmental stage of life.

- Partial, temporary or permanent disablement.
- Loss of health.
- Loss of job.
- Loss of some aspect of one's self.
- Major life change.
- Geographical relocation.
- Miscarriage.

In addition, loss can also result from seemingly positive events. For example, upon the birth of a child parents often experience loss of independence, loss of work role, loss of intimacy, loss of social interaction etc. Similarly, a promotion at work may result in lost co worker relationships, loss of leisure time and loss of feelings of self efficacy and confidence in achieving job requirements.

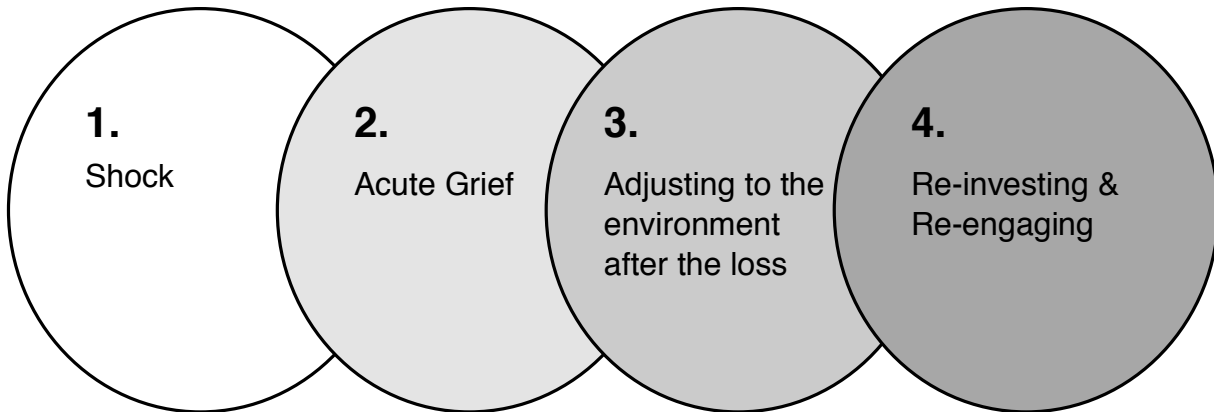
What is grief?

Grief refers to a wide range of personal experiences which occur in reaction to loss. Typically, the more important the lost object, the greater will be the intensity of distress and pain from the separation. However, grief is a complex concept which involves not only the emotional pain and suffering which follows loss, but also the changes or adaptations which one makes to life without the lost object or person. Thus, grief can be described as a natural process of learning and growth which changes over time, moving in a fluctuating pattern from greater to lesser intensity.

The Process of Grief

There is tremendous variation from person to person in grief reactions that occur. Numerous factors impact on an individual's response to loss – age, culture, personality, spiritual or religious influences, quality of social supports, gender, past experiences of grief, complexity of grief situation. Nevertheless, there are general patterns of grief which occur with consistent regularity across situations. These noticeable patterns provide a standard against which to assess an individual's grief reaction. Of course it is important to note that grief processes do not necessarily occur in an orderly or linear fashion. Rather the processes are often circular, with many painful returns to the beginning to start the process once more. Tailspins back to earlier stages of grief are an inherent aspect of the grieving experience.

Researchers in the field of grief and loss generally identify four main phases in the grief process. Each of these phases will be discussed in turn.



(Dersheimer, 1990; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Worden, 1991)

Shock

It is not surprising that many people experience a state of shock or numbness immediately after becoming aware of a loss given the often intense negative consequences. People in the shock phase typically experience a mixture of disbelief, confusion, tension, physical symptoms (e.g. coldness and tremor), apprehension and anger, all of which may occur alongside an unusual sense of calm. Usually this phase is short lived, lasting only a few days at most. The transition from shock to another phase is generally associated with the person's increased ability to accept the reality of the loss and experience the full force of their emotional reaction.

Acute Grief

Once numbness and shock subside and the full reality of the loss is accepted, an intense emotional reaction is generally experienced. The features of this reaction are often described as waves of emotion which return again and again during which the grieving person experiences numerous emotional and physical responses including:

- Pangs of intense pining or yearning for the lost object or person.
- Spasms of distress.
- Insomnia.
- Loss of energy.
- Preoccupation with the lost object or person.
- Overwhelming sadness and despair.
- Loss of function.
- Confusion.
- Somatic distress (tightness in chest or throat, shortness of breath, lack of muscle power, feelings of emptiness in stomach).

- Uncharacteristic behaviour, poor judgement.
- Restlessness.
- Loss of appetite.
- Guilt.
- Rumination about the circumstances surrounding the loss.
- Anger and hostility.
- Intrusive dreams and memories.
- Social withdrawal.
- Tendency to assume traits of a deceased loved ones behaviour.

The duration of this phase is highly variable lasting from days to months or years. Many people are surprised by their tendency to frequently re-experience this phase. It is quite common for this phase to recur numerous times over the course of the entire grief process. In order to facilitate transition from acute grief to further phases one must work through the discomfort and pain – face feelings openly and honestly, express them, tolerate them and accept them. It is important to fully experience the emotions of this phase despite their wild and overwhelming quality as suppressing these can result in chronic depression and psychological problems.

Adjusting

During the adjustment phase overwhelming pain is transformed into bearable and often “sweet sadness”. More specifically, people start to put their loss into perspective, they become able to reflect upon the significance of the loss and they begin to develop new ways of living in an environment in which the lost object is missing. This is often a time when people form a new image and identity and recommence social interaction. Previously loss energy levels will give way to renewed activity and interest.

Despite the noticeable softening of emotional pain and return of energy, people in the adjustment phase are not yet ready to let go of the lost object or person. They commonly attempt to hold on to the established routines and systems associated with their life prior to the loss. This often enables a sense of stability and continuity facilitating further growth and healing. Ideally during the adjustment phase people take stock of what is left in their lives, develop new relationships with family and friends, inventory their resources and examine their basic assumptions about their lives and their world.

Reinvesting and Re-engaging

The final phase of grief involves emotionally relocating the lost object or person and moving on with life. Moreover this phase is generally associated not with a state of “recovery” from loss but rather with a rebirth or re-conception involving greater

emotional intensity and deeper insight into one's sense of reality. Thus the experience of loss is transformed from an event to be faced and endured into an experience of personal growth and discovery. One is no longer compelled to hold on to the lost object but is comfortable with new sources of stability and continuity.

N.B. It is important to reiterate that the various phases of grief are experienced in a highly variable pattern. Some people will not experience all (or any) of the phases. Often people will revisit earlier phases. Also, the intensity of the emotional and physical responses associated with each phase will differ widely from one person to another. Overall the phases identify some common grief reactions following loss however they do not represent a "normal" or good grief response. There are no right or wrong responses to loss and no two people will pass through the process in the same way.

Dealing with Grief – Some Practical Issues

- Accept grief as a part of life – don't resist, fight or avoid it. Allow your emotions to wash over you in waves.
- Be vulnerable and receptive to your emotional reactions.
- Give yourself permission to experience your emotions – it is natural to feel anger, guilt, confusion and sadness. It is also okay to feel nothing.
- It is all right to cry.
- Accept that feeling better will take time, be patient with yourself. Make sure your self expectations are realistic.
- Talk about your feelings. Share your experience with friends, your partner, your psychologist.
- Let out your anger – what you are experiencing is unfair and unjust.
- Explore your emotional responses – keep a diary, express yourself artistically, take long walks, watch a sad movie.
- Try to be constructive in your thinking – "this will pass", "everything changes", "I'll feel differently with time".
- Keep active and involved in life – resume exercise and other activities as soon as you are able.
- Look into your life to find ways of experiencing the world on a deeper level.
- Be compassionate with others who are suffering. Try to reach out to help others in some small ways at least.
- Take control of your life (but not your feelings).
- Be honest with others about your emotional reactions. Do not be ashamed of your natural responses. Beware of being put on a pedestal by others who tell you what an inspiration you are because of your strength and your ability to cope so well.

- At the same time don't get stuck in self pity – being in a state of permanent misery is a complete waste of your life.

Complicated Grief

Although grief is experienced differently by different people sometimes the process becomes complicated and requires special attention. In general there are three main forms of complicated grief.

- Absent or delayed grief.
- Prolonged or chronic grief.
- Unusual or atypical expressions of grief.

Typically soon after becoming aware of a loss, people enter a brief phase of shock and denial. Occasionally people remain in this state for an extended period of weeks and months. This is known as absent grief. People have described feeling detached from reality and emotionally numb during periods of absent grief. A similar complication is delayed grief. This is when grieving does not occur immediately after the loss but rather at some later time. Often an unrelated event seems to trigger the memory of the loss and grief emerges. This might occur when people have a clear reason for postponing their grief reactions such as women who are near to giving birth, widows/widowers with small children requiring care. Alternately people who survive accidents must delay their own grief for others killed or harmed until they have recovered physically from their own injuries.

Prolonged or chronic grief refers to grieving which seems to never end or decrease in severity across time. People experiencing chronic grief continue to feel extreme distress which is as acute and fresh as when the loss had just occurred. To be considered chronic the grief experience must persist for some years after the loss without any significant reduction in emotional distress.

Occasionally people experience grief symptoms which are substantially different from those experienced by most other people. For instance becoming overactive without a sense of loss, engaging in dangerous or risky behaviour, making radical personal changes such as altering longstanding relationships with friends and relatives – all may be considered atypical expressions of grief. Other problematic reactions involve excessive feelings of guilt or anger about the loss; onset of anxiety, phobias or obsessive symptoms, preoccupation with thoughts of one's own death, deterioration in physical health or increased reliance on cigarettes, alcohol or drugs.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Coping with grief by Mal McKissock (1985) Published by ABC Enterprises, Sydney.

Gift of tears: A practical approach to loss and bereavement counselling by Sue Lendrum & Gabrielle Syme (1992) Published by Routledge, London.

Good grief: Experiencing loss by Carol Lee (1994) Published by Fourth Estate, London.

Grief and powerlessness: Helping people regain control of their lives by Ruth Bright (1996) Published by Jessica Kingley Publishers, London.

How we grieve: Relearning the world by Thomas Attig (1996) Published by Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Life after loss: A personal guide to dealing with death, divorce, job change and relocation by Bob Deits (1992) Published by Fisher Books, Tucson Arizona.

Living beyond loss: Death in the family edited by Froma Walsh & Monica McGoldrick (1991) Published by W. W. Norton & Co, New York.