

Dealing with Grief and Loss

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January 21, 2014

Goals:

- Explore “normal and complicated” grief
- Identify “disenfranchised grief” and its effects
- Learn ways to assist persons to deal with grief and losses

Loss Transition and Grief:

- Older and disabled persons face myriad transitions.
- Transitions are normative.
- Grief often accompanies transitions.

Transitions:

- “Large” or “small”
- Affect people in different ways
- Generational differences in facing loss and grief

Factors Affecting Transitions and Grief

- Emotional connection to those in transition
- Balance of relational expectations and obligations
- Shock impact

Factors Affecting Transitions and Grief

- Timing of the transition
- To whom the change is happening
- Adaptability and resiliency

Transitions and Grief

- Cultural differences are present.
- Each person responds uniquely.
- **Listening** is the key skill in accompanying another.

“Normal” Grief

- Is “process” not an “event”.
- Each situation is unique.
- Losses raise varied emotions.
- Grieving: a circular process; requires hard work and time.

Grief Stages

- May look like extreme anger.
- Can appear to be depression.
- Special concerns are present with dementia.

Grief “Overload”

- Several losses occurring at the same time or in rapid succession
- Grief happening to those around a person
- “Large” and “small” losses
- Some obvious, some subtle

Loss Issues

- Losses most often not replaceable
- "Anniversary" reactions
- Others may think person is "taking too long" to grieve.
- Persons need time to adjust.

Complicated Grief

- Perspectives on this vary widely.
- Persistence of symptoms or separation distress.
- Feelings of devastation or traumatization by a death/event.

Unresolved Grief

- Unresolved losses may resurface.
- Intense reaction to current loss may signal earlier unresolved grief.
- “Fallout” from previous situations may occur.

Grief can Masquerade as Other Concerns

- Anger
- Depression

Grief and Depression

- Grief: onset caused by recognized losses; anger openly expressed (may be misdirected)
- Depression: may not relate to particular loss and anger; may be turned inward

Grief and Depression

- Grief: preoccupation with particular loss with resultant guilt; person responds to support
- Depression: generalized guilt; support often rejected, self-isolation may occur

Delayed Reaction

- Feelings blocked with no time to process.
- Multiple losses occurring at the same time
- No permission to grieve at the time of loss

Exaggerated Reactions

- Person frozen in one emotion
- Grief becomes chronic
- Grief negatively affects daily functioning

Disenfranchised Grief

- Social unacceptability of openly expressing grief
- Grief from past trauma not explored adequately
- Grief discounted by others
- Suppressed grief bubbles up in crisis

Factors in Unresolved Grief

- Unexpected sudden death
- Death of child, even as adult
- Missing body
- Lack of "permission to grieve"
- Not enough time to grieve

Factors Exacerbating Grief

- Dementia
- Lack of support network
- Over dependence on deceased
- Unresolved conflicts

Factors

- Avoidance in expressing emotions
- Feeling responsible for the loss in some way
- Cumulative losses

Complicating Factors

- The loss may be a family secret
- “Anticipatory” grief for self or another

Communication About Grief and Loss

- Make no assumptions about what the person is feeling.
- Be aware of non-verbal communication.
- Hear “symbolic” language.
- Silence is communication!

Strategies for Healing

- We do not need to have all the answers.
- Key skill is listening
- Give persons the time they need on their particular journey.

Strategies for Healing: Assessment

- Supportive network?
- Possession of useful coping skills?
- Ability to express feelings?
- Connection to spiritual support?

Strategies for Healing

- Look for signs of unresolved grief.
- Help person acknowledge grief.
- Name feelings.
- Encourage person to “speak” or be “silent.”

Strategies for Healing

- Give “permission” for person to grieve.
- Be “with” persons non-verbally and with words.
- Support people in their pain.
- Don’t “protect” from sadness or dry tears too soon!

Strategies for Healing

- Identify “normalcy” of feelings in dealing with losses, especially anger.
- Educate person about loss and grief and their effects.
- Be aware of your own grief issues.

Understand Losses’ Implications

- Why were losses important?
- What do losses mean now?
- How is person affected physically, emotionally and spiritually by losses?

Is Forgiveness Work Needed?

- Are there real/imagined wrongs connected to loss?
- From whom is forgiveness needed?
- Is there need for referral to spiritual advisor?

Differentiate Between Survivor and Deceased

- Help persons redefine themselves in context of losses.
- Support individualization.

Examine Major Defenses

- What has delayed a healing process?
- Is the loss likely to reoccur?
- Give permission to share feelings.
- What events have happened to put person at risk now?

Identify and Process Unresolved Concerns

- Explore meaning of death and afterlife for a person.
- Clarify "unfinished business."
- Encourage persons to not make major decisions right after a loss if possible.

Encourage Positive Future Movement

- Support new life when person is ready.
- Discuss reinvesting emotional energy.
- Remind that grieving takes time.

Encourage Positive Future Movement

- Suggest support groups which may help.
- Build on person's strengths and resources.
- Help persons leave "legacy."
- Encourage resilience.

Support Beneficial Health Processes

- Encourage moderation in alcohol or medication.
- Stress exercise and healthy eating.
- Support mindfulness and stress reduction.
- Walk with person in journey.

Assisting Persons Build on Spiritual Strengths

- Learn person's spiritual perspective.
- Assist in developing rituals.
- Advocate for person if they have difficulty in advocating for themselves.

Helping Persons Cope with Grief and Loss

- You do not have to have all the answers.
- Give person time they need to do the grief work.
- KEEP HOPE.

“Hope Changes”

“Hope is not about believing that we can change things. Hope is about believing that we do makes a difference.”

Havel

Four Things That Matter Most

Ira Byock

- “I forgive you...Please forgive me.”
- “Thank you.”
- “I love you.”
- “Goodbye.”