Understanding Grief

LOSS IS A PART OF LIFE. No one is immune to the experience. Grief is the normal human response to loss. Each person experiences grief in their own way and in their own time. Grief is something that must be expressed and it is something that needs to be shared, meaning we need others as we work through the process of mourning. There is no right or wrong way to mourn. Mourning – the adaptation to a loss – is a process, not a state. There are four important tasks that each person must do as they mourn the loss of a loved one.

TASK 1: To Accept the Reality of the Loss

A sense of non-reality, that it couldn't really have happened, is a common early reaction. The first task of grieving is to come full face with the reality that the person is dead, that the person is gone and will not return. As they work through this process many people engage in searching behaviors such as seeing a stranger in public and mistakenly believing it to be the person who died, calling out for the person who died, or looking for signs of communication from beyond the grave. Belief and disbelief alternate while one is grappling with this task. The loss may feel unreal at some times and oh too real at others. Coming to an acceptance of the reality of the loss takes time since it involves not only an intellectual acceptance but also an emotional one. Traditional rituals such as the funeral may help many bereaved people move toward acceptance.

TASK 2: To Work Through the Pain of Grief

It is impossible to lose someone who matters to you without experiencing some level of pain. We tend to think of the pain of grief in terms of sadness, but anxiety, anger, guilt, irritability, numbness, and loneliness are also common. Every individual is unique and so it makes sense that every grief experience is unique. Not everyone experiences the same intensity of pain or feels it in the same way. Society is often uncomfortable with expressions of grief feelings and pain and therefore may send messages that this is abnormal, inappropriate, or should be hidden. To avoid the pain of grief some people may try not to feel, denying the pain is present. Some may idealize the person who died, avoiding any unpleasant thoughts about the person. Others may avoid reminders of the person who died or may use drugs or alcohol to numb the pain. Over time, the experience of pain and sadness changes. There may always be sadness when you think of someone you have loved and lost, but it is a different kind of sadness – it lacks the wrenching quality it previously had.

Adapted from Worden (1991) *Grief Counseling & Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (2nd ed.). New York: Springer Publishing

TASK 3: To Adjust to an Environment in Which the Deceased Is Missing

Adjusting to a new environment means different things to different people depending on what the relationship was with the deceased and the various roles the deceased played. The survivor usually is not aware of all the roles played by the deceased for some time after the loss occurs. Many survivors resent having to develop new skills and to take on roles themselves that were formerly performed by their partners. Not only do the bereaved have to adjust to the loss of roles previously played by the deceased, but death also confronts them with the challenge of adjusting their own sense of self and their sense of the world. It is not unusual for the bereaved to feel that they have lost direction in life. The bereaved person searches for meaning in the loss and its attendant life changes in order to make sense of it and to regain some control of his or her life. The coping strategy of redefining the loss in such a way that it can rebound to the benefit of the survivor is often part of the successful completion of this task.

TASK 4: To Emotionally Relocate the Deceased and Move on With Life

The survivor never forgets the deceased person who was so highly valued in life and never gives up their relationship with the deceased. The goal is to find an appropriate place for the dead in their emotional lives – a place that will enable them to go on living effectively in their world. They must evolve some ongoing relationship with the thoughts and memories that they associate with the deceased, but to do this in a way that would allow them to begin reinvesting back in life after the loss. For many people this is the most difficult task to accomplish. They hold tightly to the past attachment and don't allow themselves to form new ones. Some people find loss so painful that they make a pact with themselves never to love again

When is Mourning Finished?

Asking when mourning is finished is a little like asking how high is up? There is no ready answer. One benchmark of a completed grief reaction is when the person is able to think of the deceased without pain. There may always be a sense of sadness when thinking of someone you loved who has died, but a sign that mourning is nearing completion is that the sadness loses its sharp edges and the wrenching quality that it once had. Also, mourning is finished when a person can reinvest his or her emotions back into life and the living. Mourning is a long-term process, and the end will not be a return to life as it was before the death. There is a sense in which mourning can be finished, when people regain an interest in life, feel more hopeful, experience gratification again, and adapt to new roles. There is also a sense in which mourning is never finished. Grief is not a linear process. It may reappear later in life to be reworked.

"GRIEF, I've learned is really just love. It's all the love you want to give, but cannot. All that unspent love gathers up in the corners of your eyes, the lump in your throat, and in that hollow part of your chest. Grief is just love with no place to go" -Jamie Anderson

C&A Child & Adolescent Behavioral Health

an affiliate of Goodwill Industries

Adapted from Worden (1991) *Grief Counseling & Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (2nd ed.). New York: Springer Publishing