A Primer on Loss and Grief

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Living with Grief
AT WORK, AT SCHOOL, AT WORSHIP

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A Primer on Loss and Grief

Kenneth J. Doka

Introduction

One of the major problems with grief and bereavement is that so little information about the process of grief is widely disseminated. This seems strange for two reasons. First, there is much information that has been learned and studied throughout the last thirty years. And second, and even more basic, loss and transition are natural human processes, existent from the beginning of time. Certainly information about grief and loss should be widely known, an inherent part of folk wisdom.

Yet this does not seem to be the case. One of the most common questions asked by survivors of a death is whether or not their responses are, in fact, normal. And often the response of others seems to invalidate their grief. Others may expect survivors to quickly let go of their grief and get on with their lives. The understanding that grief is a long, uneven process that affects individuals on a variety of levels—physical, emotional, cognitive, spiritual and behavioral—does not seem to be widely known. In fact, a study of clergy indicated that even these frontline professionals underestimated both the nature and duration of grief (Doka and Jendreski, 1988). In a study of television depictions of grief, which both reflect and inform society, Wass (1988) found that grief was perceived as a short-term process.
In order, then, to address sensitive ways in which organizations such as workplaces, schools, and churches can address grief and grievers in their midst, it is essential that they understand the basics about grief—what it is, how it is processed, how individuals are affected. That information provides the basis of sensitive response.

**What Is Grief?**

Grief is a reaction to loss. While we often associate grief with death, any loss can cause grief reactions. For example, we grieve divorces, separations, or other losses of relationships. We may grieve the loss of a job or other work-related changes.

This recognition that loss causes grief can remind us of two critical things: First, during the course of a life-threatening illness, the individual experiencing that illness, as well as family and friends, may experience a variety of losses. In addition to the loss of health, patients, families, and friends may lose dreams and hopes for the future. The individual may experience the loss of work, physical capabilities, or appearance. All of these are likely to generate grief.

Second, any transition, however positive, may also entail loss. For example, a promotion may require changes in relationships with fellow employees, or a move to a new area. Similarly, developmental transitions, such as from childhood to adolescence or middle school to high school, can create a sense of loss. In all these situations, then, grief can be experienced.

Though losses can be due to many factors, this chapter will concentrate on losses caused by death, since that reflects the author's experience. But note that much of the discussion and suggestions can be applied to other losses.

**Who Grieves?**

That may seem like a foolish question. Obviously the person affected by the loss grieves. But it is critical to remember that many different people can be affected by a death or other loss. Family members are not the only people who grieve; friends and co-workers may grieve as well. Even people who seem to have a negative connection to the deceased may experience manifestations of grief. For example, co-workers or schoolmates who had an antagonistic
relationship may still grieve, perhaps feeling emotions such as guilt, should one party to that relationship die. Negative attachments are still attachments. Even persons who seemingly have little or no relationship may experience reactions at a loss. For example, the death of a younger person or a work-related death might remind everyone of his or her own vulnerability.

**How Is Grief Experienced?**

Grief is experienced many ways—physically, emotionally, cognitively, spiritually, and behaviorally. Each person will experience grief in his or her own distinct way. There may be physical symptoms—pain, headaches, fatigue, lethargy, and others. Emotionally, people may experience a range of feelings that can include sadness, anger, guilt, jealousy, fear, anxiety, longing, and even relief. Cognitively, people may find it difficult to concentrate or focus. They may constantly think about the person who died, recurring memories, or aspects of their illness or death. It is not unusual to experience a sense of the deceased’s presence or even to seem to hear, see, smell, or touch that person.

Grief, too, has spiritual effects as people seek to construct some meaning out of the loss. Some individuals may find comfort from their faith, while others experience a sense of spiritual alienation. Grief certainly affects the ways individuals behave. Some may avoid reminders of the loss, while others seek such reminders. Grieving individuals may seem irritable or withdrawn; others may constantly seek out activity as a diversion from pain. The key, though, is to remember that each individual grieves in his or her own way.

**Do Men and Women Grieve the Same?**

From the cradle, men and women are likely to have different experiences. It is not surprising that these different experiences may affect the ways they grieve. Martin and Doka (1999) suggest that many men may be *instrumental grievers*. This means that they are likely to experience grief more cognitively and physically than emotionally. Their affect is likely to be tempered. They may seek relief in activity or in thinking and talking about the loss. Many women are *intuitive grievers*. Their grief is likely to be experienced as waves
of different feelings. And they are likely to be helped by sharing or ventilating those feelings with others. But again, it is important to emphasize the individuality of grief. Not all men are instrumental grievers, nor all women intuitive grievers. Grieving patterns are influenced by gender, not determined by them.

Do Children Grieve?

Certainly, but children may grieve in ways different from adults. For example, younger children may not understand death. They may be too young to realize fully what death actually means. Younger children, too, have a "short feeling span," meaning that they only can sustain strong emotions for short periods of time. So grieving children may have emotional outbursts that are followed by seemingly normal activity. But this does not mean children have quickly recovered from the loss. Children may manifest their grief in many of the same ways as adults, but they also may show their grief in different ways. Acting out, sleep disturbances such as nightmares, waking up or bedwetting, regressive behaviors, and changes in school performances—all can be signs of grief.

What Affects Grief?

The nature and intensity of a person's experience of grief can be affected by many factors: the circumstances of the loss, the type and nature of the attachment, the quality of the relationship, as well as many personal, social, and cultural factors.

First of all, each relationship is different. The loss of a spouse is different from the loss of a friend, child, parent, or sibling—not necessarily easier or harder, just different.

The relationship is not only different in each role, but also in quality. Each relationship is unique and distinctly mourned. Some relationships are more ambivalent than others. That is, they have mixed elements—things one liked about the person, and things one disliked. Often relationships that have very high ambivalence are harder to resolve. Some relationships are more dependent. Some, more intense.

The ways people die are different, and that, too, affects grieving. Often deaths that are very sudden, or follow long, painful illnesses,
create problems for resolving grief. Grieving a suicide or homicide is different from grieving a natural death.

Sometimes the circumstances as well as the cause of the death can create special issues for survivors. In one case, Tom had great difficulty in resolving the loss of his parent, in part because the death took place on a day when he was skiing and was unreachable.

Not only are relationships and circumstances different—each person is, too. Each of us has his or her unique personality and individual ways of coping. Some people are better able to cope than others are. And everyone copes with a crisis in different ways. Some will bury themselves in work, seeking diversion; some will want to talk; others will avoid conversation.

A person’s background affects grieving. Everyone belongs to varied ethnic and religious groups, each with its own beliefs and rituals about death. Sometimes these rituals, customs, and beliefs will facilitate grieving, other times they may complicate it. For example, perhaps our religious beliefs provide comfort that the person is in heaven or at peace.

Situations may be different as well. It is harder to resolve grief if one is simultaneously dealing with all kinds of other crises in one’s life. It is harder to deal with the stress of grief if one’s health is poor. It is harder to cope with loss if friends and families are unavailable or not supportive.

How Is Grief Processed?

Grief is rarely processed in predictable patterns—it is a process unique to every individual. It may be helpful to describe grief as a roller coaster, full of ups and downs, highs and lows. Like many roller coasters, the ride tends to be rougher in the beginning, the lows deeper and longer. Gradually, though, over time the highs and lows become less intense.

Often holidays, special days, and the anniversary of the death are the low times. Holidays and special days such as birthdays are heavily invested with memories. It is natural that the pain of loss would be especially keen then. The anniversary of the death, too, is often a low point. Here, even the season and weather remind one of the time of loss. And each date—the anniversary of hospitalization, the date of death, the date of the funeral—may have its own significance.
How Long Does Grief Take?

As long as it needs. Again, every loss and every individual is different. The popular misconception of grief is that people get over their losses in a relatively short period of time—perhaps a few months or a year at most. The reality is different. Generally, grief tends, in significant relationships, to be most intense for the first two or so years. After that the roller coaster tends to lessen. While persons still experience lows, perhaps even several years after a loss, they tend to be less intense, come less often, and not last as long. Hopefully, these lows will continue to become less intense with time. But there is no timetable for grief.

But People Do Recover from Grief?

Recovery perhaps is not the best word. It assumes that grief is an illness that one gets over in time. Rather, grief results from transitions that everyone faces. Once we experience such a significant transition, we are changed by it. One never goes back to the way things were. Life now is different as a result of the loss.

For most people, the pain of grief lessens over time, and they are able to return to levels of functioning similar to before the loss. Some may even experience a sense of growth, new insights, or skills sharpened as they deal with the loss. But they still live with the loss. They may have experiences even years after the loss where the absence of the person is felt keenly. For example, at her wedding, Kathleen sorely missed her grandfather, who had died six years before. She was well aware this was the only wedding of all his grandchildren that he did not live to see.

Other survivors may have more complicated reactions, still experiencing intense reaction to the loss years after. Here, the relationship or the circumstances surrounding the loss often created conditions that made it more difficult to deal with one's grief. Sudden, violent deaths, or losses in conflicted, ambivalent relationships are examples of types of situations or relationships that might complicate grieving.

How Does Grief Affect People at Work?

Grief can affect people in many ways. Some people actually use
work as a diversion, spending more time and effort there as a way to seek respite from the loss. Others may be easily distracted. They may find it hard to concentrate or focus on work, and their efficiency may suffer. Some may find it difficult to maintain an emotional balance. They may struggle not to cry or seem overtly sad. Still others may be angry or irritable.

When work-related deaths occur, many co-workers may be affected. Not only may they experience grief over the person who died, they also may be influenced by the trauma or death, experiencing a greater degree of anxiety as they work.

How Does Grief Affect Children in School?

Children may be affected in many of the same ways. They may feel anxious and insecure. They may act out, showing flashes of anger. They may show regressive behaviors. They may seek attention or seem withdrawn. They may have physical complaints, constantly feeling unwell. Like adults, children may find it difficult to focus or concentrate, becoming easily distracted. Their performance in school may decline. Since many of the manifestations mimic learning disabilities, school counselors and psychologists are well advised to assess possible recent losses as they evaluate students.

Can Grief Affect People at Worship?

Certainly, grief has spiritual effects. Some individuals may feel angry. They may feel alienated from God or disappointed in the support they received from their worshipping communities. Others may struggle with their faith as they seek to understand their loss. Still others may experience a renewed appreciation of their faith and their faith community.

What Can People Do To Help?

While each chapter has specific suggestions, a few general comments might help. Four things may be helpful to persons who are grieving.

First, listen. Many grieving individuals simply need a safe place to explore their many reactions to a loss. One need not try to make people feel better. Nothing one can say can remove grief. Nor is it helpful to share one’s own losses at this point. Simply ask the per-
son how they are and listen as they share their grief and problems.

Second, if you can, share memories of the person who died. Sharing one’s own stories and memories can assist persons who are grieving as they struggle to understand the life and the death of the loved one.

Third, offer tangible support. There are many ways one can show one cares, including participation in rituals and contributions to memorials. But there are other ways one can help as well. Asking people how they are dealing with the loss demonstrates support. It is more helpful to be specific in your help—offering, for example, to assist them with work, or helping with childcare or a meal—rather than simply saying, “Call me,” or, “Can I help?” Bereaved persons may be reluctant to seek help or even be too confused and disoriented to assess what they need.

Finally, watch for danger signs. Self-destructive behaviors such as drinking to excess, suicidal expressions, problematic behaviors, or actions destructive to others are clear signs that the persons may need professional assistance in dealing with the loss. Sensitively assisting individuals in seeking such help shows one’s own support and demonstrates caring.

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