

## Grief and Loss in Addiction & Recovery

**Understanding Grief: From Theoretical Framework To Making A Difference**

by Jerry Fouchey, BS, MA, SpA, CADC  
Dawn Farm Personal Medicine Therapist  
& Barb Smith, author of "Brent's World"

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### Key Questions:

- Why do we talk about Grief?
- Why do we experience Grief?
- What are some Theories about Grief?
- How is Grief related to Addiction?
- How is Grief experienced in Recovery?
- What helps Make a Difference with Grief?

### Key Concepts for Grief and Loss

1. Grief is real and cannot be ignored.
2. Expressions of Grief are many and varied.
3. The stages of Grief are generally not linear.
4. Working through the emotions requires a willingness to acknowledge the loss/change.
5. It takes time to work through Grief.
6. Active alcoholism or addiction significantly complicates the process of Grief.

### Why talk about Grief?

- Change happens!
- To live is to experience loss
- "Little Deaths"
- "*Change is Inevitable—Growth is Optional.*"  
Walt Disney

### We Experience Grief because of our Attachments



- Secure
- Anxious
- Avoidant

### People Have Attachments

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Relationships With Others</li> <li>▪ Job or Profession</li> <li>▪ Independence</li> <li>▪ Control Over One's Schedule</li> <li>▪ Future Plans/Expectations</li> <li>▪ Self-Image or Identity</li> <li>▪ Body with a Health Status</li> <li>▪ Political Agency</li> <li>▪ Multiple Roles</li> <li>▪ A Sense of Normal</li> <li>▪ Sense of Meaning or Purpose</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Personality and Character</li> <li>▪ Cultural Background</li> <li>▪ Multiple Roles in Relationships</li> <li>▪ Regular Habits and Behaviors</li> <li>▪ A Private Life</li> <li>▪ A Perceived Future</li> <li>▪ A Transcendent Dimension/Spiritual Life</li> <li>▪ Life Itself</li> </ul> |
|---|---|

## Each Response to Grief or Loss Is Unique



Some broad similarities exist, BUT...

- Perception is key
- Individual response
- Frequency of exposure
- Social support

## Typical Grief Responses

As bio-psycho-social-spiritual persons have

- Emotional
- Physical
- Mental or Cognitive
- Social or Behavioral
- Spiritual

...responses to loss

## Grief vs Depression

Grief can feel like a rollercoaster.



Depression can feel like a dead end.

## Myths vs Facts

1. The pain of the loss will go away faster if I ignore it.
2. It's important to be "be strong" in the face of loss.
3. If I don't cry, it means I'm not sorry about the loss.
4. Grief lasts about a year.

## E. Kubler-Ross identifies Five Stages of Grief:

1. Denial/Shock/Disbelief: *"This can't be happening."*
2. Anger: *"Why is this happening? Who is to blame? What should have been done differently?"*
3. Bargaining: *"Make this not happen, in return I will \_\_\_\_\_."*
4. Depression: *"I'm so sad."*
5. Acceptance: *"I can exist with what happened."*

## Stroebe & Schut

### Dual Process Model:

- Oscillating between a 'Loss-oriented' state and a 'Restoration-oriented' state
  - **Loss-oriented:** more emotional work of grief
  - **Restoration-oriented:** more task-focused grief work
- 'Adaptive denial and distraction' from the emotional work of grief



FIGURE 1 A dual process model of coping with bereavement.

## J. William Worden

### The 4 Tasks of Mourning



1. Accept the reality of the loss.
2. Experience and work through the pain of grief.
3. Adjust to the new "normal" or life without whatever was lost.
4. Emotionally relocate the loss and move forward in life.

#### 1) Accept the Reality

To come full face with the fact that your loss is real and will not be reversed. An immediate reunion with it is impossible.

▪ **Obstacles:**

- Denying the facts of the loss.
- Denying the meaning of the loss, e.g. “It wasn’t a good job anyway”, or “I don’t miss him,” or “I’m just as healthy as I ever was.”
- Minimizing the loss. “It’s not that big of a deal.”

#### 2) Experience & Work Through the Pain

It is impossible to lose something or someone you have been deeply attached to without experiencing some level of pain.

▪ **Obstacles:**

- Not allowing yourself to feel it or denying that the pain is present. Drinking or drugging the feelings away.
- Avoiding reminders of the loss – e.g., trying to find a ‘geographic cure’ by moving to another location, or traveling.

#### 3) The New “Normal”

Coming to terms with the effects of the loss (raising children alone, facing unemployment or handicap, redefinition of self, etc.).

- A. **External Adjustments:** how the loss affects your everyday functioning in the world
- B. **Internal Adjustments:** how the loss affects your sense of self
- C. **Spiritual Adjustments:** how the loss affects your beliefs, values and assumptions about the world

▪ **Obstacles:**

- Promoting your own helplessness.
- Not developing the skills you need to cope or function in the new role(s).
- Withdrawing from the world. Refusing to see yourself or the world differently.

#### 4) Emotionally Relocate

To find a place for what was lost that will enable us to remain connected with them/it but in a way that will not keep us from going on with life.

▪ **Obstacles:**

- Withdrawal from others and life.
- Unwillingness to love or be healthily vulnerable.
- Unwillingness to risk; making a vow to never invest yourself again.
- Holding on so tight to the past that you’re unable to form new relationships or develop new skills.

#### How Addiction Interferes with Grief . . .

- Unresolved grief, loss & trauma often predate the use of alcohol and drugs
- There is a lack of a healthy support system
- We cannot process grief when drunk or high
- Losses tend to pile up and not be fully grieved
- Addicts tend to minimize and normalize losses
- Eventually loose the *Sense of Self*.

### Other Losses in Addiction

- Experiences and events
- Relationships with family/friends
- Parenting time
- Family milestones
- Deaths/communal expressions of grief
- Time
- Opportunities
- Perinatal
- Spiritual

### Grieving is Necessary!

“Man, when he does  
not grieve, . . .  
hardly exists.”

- Antonio Porchia



### Losses when moving from Active Addiction into Recovery . . .



“What are you leaving behind?”

### Loss of alcohol and other drugs . . .



### Loss of Rituals and Roles



In early recovery people begin to realize that they have lost

**a lot...**

## Barriers to Grieving in Recovery

- Grief is complicated by guilt, shame, trauma or stigma
- Lack of social support: a sense of safety & trust
- Being unable to identify, verbalize or feel feelings
- Feelings unfreeze and can be overwhelming
- Seemingly unrelated feelings like anger, depression or anxiety may arise at new intense levels
- A lack of healthy coping skills
- Lack of a plan for alcohol/drug craving

## Recovery is a Process

- Grief work, like addiction recovery, is not a linear process.
- Ideally, people in recovery acknowledge, understand, and accept their losses and effectively move through their grief.



## Some Tasks in Recovery

- Learn to identify and verbalize the feelings
- Develop skills to cope with the feelings
- Learn to tolerate “negative” feelings
- Open up, identify and talk about the losses
- Accept the necessary social support
- Develop new attachments

## Develop New Rituals



## Recovery offers the opportunity to:

- grieve lost relationships
- heal damaged ones,
- build new ones and
- make meaning of the past by helping others.



Recovery also offers the opportunity to connect or reconnect with one's spiritual self and to grow spiritually.



## What About the Losses and Grieving Processes For the Family and Friends of Addicts and Alcoholics?

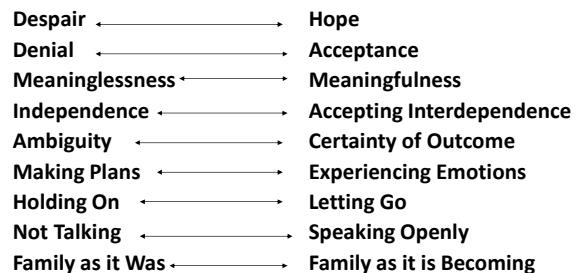
### Losses For Family & Friends May Include:

- Relationships
- Financial Security
- Hopes and Dreams
- Self-esteem
- Social Standing
- Emotional Support or "Presence"
- Other Important Things; tangible and intangible

### These Can Be Complicated Losses

- Painful Experiences/Memories
- Complex/Conflicted Feelings
- Stigma, Secrecy & Shame
- Loss of Contact by Choice
- Incarceration
- Death

### Tensions for Families



### Getting Support When You Are Grieving

- Don't grieve alone
- Experience your feelings
- Express your feelings in a tangible or creative way
- Look after your physical health



### Social support Help from the community ...



**"The best therapy for grief is time and community."**

Michael S. Logan

### Types of Support from Family/Friends/Others ...



### Spiritual Support



### Rituals

Grief rituals, ceremonies and tributes acknowledge the pain of loss while offering social support and reaffirmation of life ...



### Self-care



### Know Your Grief Triggers & Take Action



### When is Grief Healed?

- When a person can think of what was lost without acute pain?
- When one can think of what was lost without physical manifestations such as crying or feeling tightness in the chest?
- When one can reinvest his/her emotions into life and the living? Make new attachments?
- When one can regain an interest in life, feel more hopeful, experience healthy gratification again, and adapt to new roles?
- Is there a time limit? 1 year? 4 seasons? 2 years?

## When Grief Isn't Healing?

- Relational Factors
- Circumstantial Factors
- Historical Factors
- Personality Factors
- Social Factors



## The Goals of Grief WORK

- Grief therapy's goal is not about forgetting the loss but about remembering it with less pain.
- Developing adaptive coping mechanisms.
- Finding meaning.
- AA and Al-Anon, NA and Nar-Anon = grief work



## Effectively Providing Support For Others Who Are Grieving

### Helping Someone who is Grieving



- Listen Actively
- Acknowledge the uniqueness of the loss
- Offer practical help
- Make contact, write a personal note
- Be aware of triggers - holidays and anniversaries

## What to say . . .

### Effective words:

I'm sorry  
How are you doing with all this?  
What can I do for you?  
I'm here and I want to listen.  
Please tell me what you're feeling.  
This must be hard for you.  
I'll call tomorrow  
You must be really hurting  
It isn't fair, is it?  
You must really feel angry.  
Take all the time you need.  
I'm sad for you.  
I don't know why it happened.  
What's the hardest part for you?

### Words to avoid:

I understand how you feel.  
Death was a blessing.  
It was God's will.  
It all happened for the best.  
You're still young.  
Your whole life is ahead of you.  
You can have other children.  
You can always remarry.  
Call me when I can help.  
Something good will come of this.  
At least you have another child.  
She/he led a full life.  
It's time to put it behind you.  
Be strong!

**"I have seen enough of life to know  
that grief will leave its mark."**

**But I have also seen enough of life to know  
that so, too, will love."**

Peter Wehner  
NYT 3/26/2017

**Barb Smith  
Author of  
“Brent’s World”**

