

Grief and Loss in Addiction & Recovery

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

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

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/addiction significantly complicate the processing of Grief.

Why talk about Grief?

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

Why talk about Grief?

"Working through our endings allows us to redefine our relationships, to surrender what is dead (or lost) and to accept what is alive, and to be in the world more fully to face the new situation."



- Stanley Keleman

Why We Experience Grief

- Attachment Theory
 - Secure
 - Avoidant
 - Anxious



Persons have . . .

- Personality and Character
- A Past
- A Cultural Background
- Roles
- Political Agency
- Regular Habits and Behaviors
- A Body
- A Private Life
- A Perceived Future
- A Transcendent Dimension/Spiritual Life

The Many Types of Losses:

- Employment
- Relationships
- Independence
- Control Over One's Schedule
- Future Plans/Expectations
- Self-Image/Identity
- Health Status
- Limb, Mobility or Function
- Political Agency
- Roles
- Sense of Normal
- Faith, Meaning or Purpose
- Drug of Choice
- Life Itself

Uniqueness of Loss & Grief Response



Some broad similarities
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.

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Adapted from: Janice Fim, PhD, LMSW

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Myths vs Facts

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

THEORIES ABOUT GRIEF

E. Kubler-Ross

The five stages of grief:

- 1. Denial/Shock/Disbelief:** *"This can't be happening."*
Failure to acknowledge the facts, disbelief in the face of overwhelming evidence.
- 2. Anger:** *"Why is this happening? Who is to blame? What should have been done differently?"*
It can't be true, someone is lying.
- 3. Bargaining:** *"Make this not happen, in return I will ____."*
If I do x there will be a postponement of what seems to be inevitable.
- 4. Depression:** *"I'm so sad."*
The sense of great loss; the reduction of the self-image; the realization of one's own shattered invulnerability and mortality.
- 5. Acceptance:** *"I'm able to exist with what happened."*
The inevitable will come no matter what is done; it must be faced.


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.


Martin & Doka



- Focused on "Grieving Styles," contrasting patterns of grieving and mourning
- The patterns identified are not related solely to gender, but to 'style' of mourning
 - Intuitive** – emphasizing the experiencing and expression of emotion
 - Instrumental** – focuses on practical matters and problem solving
- These contrasting styles are poles on a spectrum or continuum
- Related more to socialization and personality types than to gender

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 what 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 return, i.e. immediate reunion or regaining it is impossible.

- Obstacles:**
 - Denying the facts of 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.
 - Cutting off your feelings and denying that pain is present.
 - Avoiding reminders of the loss – e.g., trying to find a ‘geographic cure’ by moving to another location, or travelling

3) The New “Normal”

Coming to terms with being without (maybe raising children alone, facing future 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 to function in new roles.
 - 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.

"To spare oneself from grief at all cost can be achieved only at the price of total detachment, which excludes the ability to experience happiness."

Dr. Erich Fromm

Grief & Loss in Addiction

- **Unresolved grief, loss & trauma often predate use of alcohol and drugs**
- **Compounded in addiction**
- **Complicated by use**
- **Minimized**
- **Normalized**

Grief & Loss in Addiction

- **Use alcohol and other drugs to cope**
- **Lack of a healthy support system**
- **Medicate / Avoid / Minimize feelings**
- **Grief not processed**
- **Losses not *fully* grieved**
- **Loss of the Sense of SELF in the long run**

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 to Recovery . . .



“What are you leaving behind?”

Loss of alcohol and other drugs ...



Loss of Rituals, etc...



In early recovery people begin to realize that they have lost

a lot...

“... If you're an addict on the road to recovery, be prepared to experience emotions in a new way – the good and bad; and be sure to have a plan in place to fight off the cravings while you're in that vulnerable state.”

–Michael Bloch

“Learn to “Surf the Emotional Urges.”

Barriers to Grieving

- Lack of social support
- Lack of safety or trust
- Lack of a plan for alcohol/drug craving
- Feelings unfreeze and feel overwhelming
- Unable to identify, verbalize or feel feelings
- Seemingly unrelated feelings may arise at new intense levels Ex: anger, depression, anxiety

Barriers to Grieving

- A lack of healthy coping skills
- Grief is complicated by guilt, shame, stigma or trauma
- Avoidance – The inability or unwillingness to grieve can be a barrier to recovery and building relationships.

Recovery is a Process

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



Some Tasks in Recovery

- Develop skills to cope with feelings
- Open up, identify and talk about losses
- Learn to identify and verbalize feelings
- Learn to tolerate “negative” feelings
- 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.



FOR Family & Loved Ones

“The **reaction to loss** that is widely experienced by friends and family members of persons who are addicted . . . **is profound grief**. . . because the **loss is ambiguous**.

If a person dies, the grief is unambiguous: the social role the deceased played is no longer occupied and the deceased cannot fulfill obligations or promises. The spouse who becomes addicted . . . often **ceases to fulfill obligations or promises, but physically the social role is still occupied.**”

-Vicki Loyer-Carlson, Ph.D., LMFT

Losses May Include:

- Relationships
- Financial security
- Hopes and dreams
- Self-esteem
- Social standing
- Emotional support or “presence”
- Other important tangible and intangible things

Complicated Losses

- Painful experiences/memories
- Complex feelings (resentment, anger)
- Stigma, secrecy, shame
- Loss of contact by choice
- Incarceration
- Death

Tensions for Families

- | | | |
|------------------|--------|---------------------------|
| Despair | ←————→ | Hope |
| Denial | ←————→ | Acceptance |
| Meaninglessness | ←————→ | Meaningfulness |
| Independence | ←————→ | Accepting Interdependence |
| Ambiguity | ←————→ | Certainty of Outcome |
| Making Plans | ←————→ | Experiencing Emotions |
| Holding On | ←————→ | Letting Go |
| Not Talking | ←————→ | Speaking Openly |
| Family as it Was | ←————→ | Family as it is Becoming |

- Grief feels lonely for family and friends, and circumstances may be especially challenging.
- Help, support and understanding are available, and healing is possible.



- It can be hard work – but it is worth the effort!

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

Community: AA, NA, etc...

- A safe place to be open about feelings and experiences without shame
- 12 Step work helps people:
 - express grief
 - gain perspective and acceptance
 - forgive and move forward with their lives
- Provides opportunities to give back to others and make meaning

Support from family/friends/others ...



Types of Support

- Let family/friends/coworkers/others know what you need.
- Support can dissipate over time - continue to ask for and seek out support.
- If family/friends are unavailable or unsupportive (including well-intentioned but misguided efforts to be supportive) seek support elsewhere.
- Consider professional support.

Spiritual Support



Rituals

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



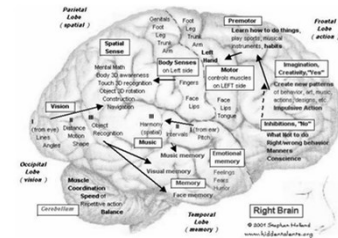
Tributes

- Creating a tribute, legacy or memorial to honor and remember a loved one can provide comfort
- People often find comfort in donating to a related cause and/or becoming involved in volunteer or service work, or other ways of helping others



Experiential Techniques

Experiential Therapies (art, writing, music) engage areas of the brain involved in grief, memory, healing and recovery.



Self-care



Know Your Grief Triggers



Taking Action Around Triggers

- Identify sources of support
- Talk about it
- Plan ahead (more meetings, more social contact, more service work, more spiritual practice etc...)
- Identify healthy, helpful alternatives

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?

“Grief heals when it is received by a caring other.”

- Wendy Lustbader

When Grief Isn't Healing

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



Grief WORK

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



GIVING SUPPORT

Helping Someone who is Grieving



- Listen
- Acknowledge the uniqueness of grief
- Offer practical help
- Make contact, write a personal note
- Be aware of 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!

Taking Hold

"Grieving allows us to heal, to remember with love rather than pain.

It is a sorting process.

One by one you let go of things that are gone and you mourn for them.

One by one you take hold of

the things that have become a part of who you are and build again."

- Rachael Naomi Remen

"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

Resources

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