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Bereavement in the Modern Western World

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**BEREAVEMENT
IN THE
MODERN WESTERN WORLD**



R. David San Filippo, Ph.D.

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To my father, Bob San Filippo. Through his fathering, mentoring, and friendship you taught me to look at life and death from a personal perspective. I miss you.

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BEREAVEMENT IN THE MODERN WESTERN WORLD



Introduction

Bereavement is the process of suffering that follows the loss of a living being that is significant to someone. When one suffers, she or he has to endure an unpleasant experience, in the case of bereavement, the loss of something special to the person. This loss most often is a loved one but could also include the loss of a pet, relationship, or physical or mental capability. This state of suffering is called grief. In describing his grief, C. S. Lewis stated, after the loss of his wife, “No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid.” Others describe grief as being all consuming and then as the initial emotions of grief subside, and the bereavement process sets in, grief comes more in the sense of waves of emotion that are brought on by memories and reminders of the lost loved one. Over time these waves of emotions become less frequent but when re-experienced, can be just as powerful as when the death initially occurred. This e-book will look at bereavement as a result of the loss of a loved one through death.

The process of bereavement includes periods of mourning that are expressed in many ways and emotions. The practices of mourning the dead differ between individuals, cultures, and religious practices. Mourning is the way one expresses one’s grief. According to Richard

Kalish, “The ways in which we mourn are heavily influenced by our culture.” The mourning process may last for days, weeks, and in some cases, years. During this period, the mourners may wear different clothing or adornments, practice certain rituals, or abstain from various



activities such as speaking, discussing the dead, engaging in personal relationships with others, or other normal daily activities.

C. S. Lewis described his mourning process by commenting, Grief still feels like fear. Perhaps, more strictly, like suspense. Or like waiting; just hanging about waiting for something to happen. It gives life a permanently provisional feeling. It doesn't seem worth starting anything.

He then asks, “Does grief finally subside into boredom tinged by faint nausea?” The answer to this question, for most, is that grief ultimately does subside as the memories of the loved one take their place in our unconsciousness and our normal activities of daily living adapt to encompass the void left by the lost loved one, and life takes on a new normal.

Processes of Grief

Most people who are mourning suffer from some psychological and emotional turmoil that can be immediately intense followed by transient periods of yearning for the deceased and/or the former way of life, emotional disorganization, and then ultimately a period of reorganization to a new way of life without the deceased. According to psychologist Linda Viney,

All people in mourning, first experience shock and numbness. They then go on to show signs of psychological strain, as well as the feelings of anger, anxiety, guilt, sadness, depression and even despair.

The process of grieving the loss of someone, a relationship, or capacity is different for each person. Studies have shown that many women and men grieve differently. Women are more inclined to emote their feelings, showing their emotions, and sharing their feelings with others. Men, conversely, tend to withhold their emotions. Their initial response to grief is more cognitive. As Terry Martin and Kenneth Doka write, “They may first contemplate the



implications of their loss, before encountering the pain of separation.” Men usually grieve by themselves, not sharing much of their feelings. Although some women grieve similarly to men and men similarly to women, the differences in woman/male grief can create

communication difficulties between genders during times of bereavement.

Researchers and therapists have observed various “stages” of grief, based upon their personal and professional perspectives. Some subscribe to a similarity to Kübler-Ross’ five stages of dying:

1. Denial

2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

As the bereaved processes through their grief, these stages could encompass their grieving process. Initially there is a period of denial that the death has occurred. Then there may be periods of anger towards the deceased for various reasons such as being left behind, unfinished business, etc. Bargaining might be with God to have an opportunity to communicate with the deceased through after-death communications. Some people might seek out the services of a psychic to make contact with the deceased. Depression may set in if the bereaved allows her or himself to fall into this emotional state. Finally the bereaved begins to accept the finality of the death and begins to re-build their life.

A psychoanalytical approach to understanding the stages of grieving views the process as periods of:

1. Yearning
2. Emotional disorganization and despair
3. Reorganization

Initially there is a yearning for the lost person, a sense of persistently, wistfully, or sadly remembering the deceased. This is followed by a period of emotional upheaval when the bereaved emotions are unpredictable. There are highs and lows of emotions. There are periods of morose mourning and then periods of some clarity and sense that life will go on. These emotions can be combined with a sense of despair that the bereaved may not be able to move on

in life without the deceased. And then finally a period of reorganization, when the bereaved begin their new life without the deceased.

J. R. Averill has observed the grieving process to be stages of:

1. Shock
2. Despair
3. Recovery

The shock and despair stages are similar to those described by other approaches to grieving. The recovery stage is similar to the acceptance and reorganization stages of the other theories.

Colin Parkes has observed the grieving process similarly as other theorists but has added a more sensory approach to some of the stages. He defines the stages as:

1. Numbness
2. Pining
3. Depression
4. Recovery

The numbness is a physical, psychological, and emotional numbness to a death or way of life. During this time decision-making and physical activities can be impaired. During the pining stage the bereaved may yearn or wish the deceased person to be back in their life. Depression can set in as the bereaved have periods of emotional disorganization and despair. Finally recovery begins and the bereaved to begin to fill in the voids created by the death of the deceased.

All of these theories and observations are similar. Most people go through some or all of the stages, dependent on their personal constructs of death. The bereaved may vacillate between different stages during their mourning period. Finally, each person's grieving process is personal

and may be influenced by many factors such as age, education, relationship, culture, or religion. The bereaved should be allowed to process through their grief in their own personal manner as long as their bereavement process does not harm themselves or others.

Symptoms of Grief

The symptoms of grief can be observed and felt somatically, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. As the bereaved grieve they may feel and/or show their grief through physical manifestations such as:

1. Crying and sobbing
2. Tightness of the throat
3. Choking with shortness of breath
4. Sighing
5. Tightness in the abdomen or a feeling of emptiness in the abdomen
6. Lack of muscular strength
7. Muscular tension
8. Restlessness
9. Sexual dysfunction
10. Lack of care of personal hygiene or appearance

Emotional and psychological grief may be demonstrated by the bereaved:

1. By acting aimless in their activities
2. Having no interest in any activities
3. Acting depressed
4. Deny the loss
5. By continuously searching for the deceased person
6. A sense of relief
7. A sense of guilt
8. Anger

9. Attempts to make sense of the death of someone
10. Attempts to find new meaning for life

The bereaved can be searching for the deceased person by their pining for the person, being preoccupied with thoughts of the deceased, being perceptually sensitive to similar looks, sounds, smells, or activities of and with the deceased, dreaming of the lost one, or feeling a sense of presence of the deceased.

Often the bereaved have a sense of relief that the death has occurred. This relief could be due to the perceived release of the deceased from a prolonged, and possibly painful death and/or physical or mental incapacitations. It can also be a relief to the bereaved, being released from the care and/or responsibilities for the deceased.

The sense of relief, following the death of someone, also can be followed by a feeling of guilt associated with the questions of what more could the bereaved do for the deceased before her or his death to either prevent the death or make the process more palliative. Guilt also can be associated with a conscious or unconscious death wish for the deceased prior to her or his death. Survival guilt may also be present for the bereaved if they feel that they should have been the one to die, not the deceased, or that they should have died together.

The bereaved may act angry towards the deceased, themselves, or others out of frustration of being left behind by the deceased, not dying before the deceased, or not dying with the deceased. The anger can be manifested towards the deceased by statements made by the bereaved about the deceased or by the bereaved not caring for her or himself physically or emotionally. Anger also can be projected to others either by angry or accusatory statements made to family members, friends, or care-givers of the deceased regarding their relationship or care rendered to the deceased before her or his death.

As the bereaved process through their mourning they attempt to make sense to why a loved one has died and in making sense of the death find a meaning for the experience so that it can be incorporated into the bereaved's personal constructs of life and death. George Kelly's personal construct theory provides a model of how people form a belief construct and incorporate these constructs into their lives. In Kelly's theory, constructs are cognitive patterns or paradigms that an individual creates to understand and apply to current and future events. These constructs are created on the basis of the individual's personal experiences and cultural influences. Therefore, an individual's construct regarding death, dying, and bereavement can have a direct effect on how the bereaved will respond to someone's death.

Making sense and finding meaning to death can lead the bereaved to begin to restructure their lives, to incorporate the loss of a loved one, and create a new life with the deceased being a part of the new life in memories and stories told about the them. Viktor Frankl theorizes that all reality has meaning, dependent on an individual's perceptions and attitudes, and that life never ceases to have meaning. According to Frankl, "There is nothing in the world, I venture to say, that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one's life." He further comments, "We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation." One of the premises of Frankl's logotherapy for finding meaning to life pertains to the attitude that is taken when one is confronted with unavoidable pain such as death and bereavement.

According to Kalish, "The meaning of a person's death for the survivors include not only the loss of someone to whom they are deeply attached, but the loss of someone who performed meaningful roles in their lives." As the bereaved process through their grief, some may

consciously or unconsciously assume the roles and identities of the deceased. According to Stephen Hersh,

Others may begin to notice that in various ways survivors take on the identity of the deceased. This may be in the form of clothes, color, food, or music preferences, or likes and dislikes of certain people and experiences. These behaviors represent unconscious ways to keep alive and further incorporate the deceased into life.

Following the death of a loved one, the bereaved may also demonstrate their grief through their lack of or consistency in spiritual practices or inversely, they become absorbed in their religious practices. Some bereaved have a period of anger towards God and will not want to take part in religious practices or hear about the “healing powers of God.” Others will find a peace and meaning through their faith and dependency on God. Their faith will be strengthened by their loss and it will help them overcome the loss by finding purpose and meaning to their loss. As St. Paul writes to the Romans, “All things work for the good, for those who know God,” (NIV, Romans 8:28). Buddhist priest and philosopher Thich Nhat Hanh states,



Life is filled with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonders, like the blue sky, the sunshine, the eyes of a baby. To suffer is not enough. We must also be in touch with the wonders of life. They are within us and all around us, everywhere, any time.

Methods to Reduce Grief

The suffering of grief can be reduced by ritual funeral and burial practices, remembrances of the deceased, telling of stories of the deceased, and having a sense of peace about the deceased existence after death. Funeral and burial practices are generally religiously and culturally specific to the family of the deceased. How the deceased is remembered is also culturally specific and may also include personal practices by the bereaved such as memorials and stories told about the deceased. Examples of the deceased finding peace and the disposition of the deceased beyond this life are found in philosophical and spiritual beliefs and awareness of transpersonal experiences such near-death experiences and after-death communications (Guggenheim, 1997; San Filippo, 1998).

Funerals and Burial Practices



Funerals and burial practices differ between religions, cultures, and personal choices. Some people have lavish funerals for their loved one, where others have very subdued services. Some choose not to have a funeral service and instead have a memorial service for the deceased. There are many issues that need to be addressed by the bereaved either with the deceased, before her or his death, or after the death and with family and friends. The deceased's expressed wishes, the family's wishes, and the customs and practices of the family's culture and religion will often dictate which choices are made. Some of the choices that need to be made are:

1. To embalm or cremate the deceased?

2. To have an open or closed casket?
3. To have a “wake” period where others are allowed to pay their respects to the deceased?
4. To have a funeral or memorial service?
5. What type of funeral or memorial service?
6. Whether to have the deceased’s remains interned either below or above ground or at sea, or in some cases, in outer space or saved in an urn?
7. Where to have the cremated remains distributed?
8. What type of memorial stone or plaque placed at the place of internment?
9. What to say on the memorial stone or plaque?
10. How to announce the death of the deceased and what to say in these announcements?

Funeral services generally involve the remains of the deceased being present at the service either in a casket or urn. In a memorial service, there may be remembrances of the deceased such as pictures and beloved items but the body of the deceased is not present. Memorial services may occur days or weeks after the final disposition of the deceased. There may be several services, dependent on the deceased’s involvement in various organizations or groups. Announcing the death through newspapers, newsletters, and other publications are in many cases the last words about the deceased’s life and will partially represent the social history of the deceased’s existence in this life. When preparing the announcements of my father’s death, my brothers and mother reflected on the pertinent events of my father’s public and private life

and considered how to share these events with others. The outcomes of all of these activities are meant to meet the requests of the deceased, to share the loss with others, and to help the bereaved to bring a formal social closure to the life of the deceased.

After the final disposition of the deceased, she or he is no longer recognized as being a member of society. To complete the process of ending the deceased's social existence, the bereaved are required to go through steps to legally end the person's existence by:

1. Executing the final Will & Testament of the deceased or other legal steps if a will does not exist
2. Notifying all governmental agencies of the deceased's death
3. Notifying all insurance companies of the death
4. Reassign all assets to the next-of-kin or designates, based up on the final Will & Testament or other arrangements

The funeral, memorial services, and legal activities are socially, legally, culturally, and religiously, intended to recognize the death of a person and to close their existence in this life. The deceased's life will then be remembered through the memorials created on behalf of the deceased and the memories held by family, friends, and acquaintances. The completion of the social and legal aspects of disposition of the deceased can help bring closure to the bereaved and allow them to move on with their personal journeys of mourning.

Social & Psychological Approach to Moving through the Mourning Process

In order for the bereaved to move on after the death of a loved one, it is important that they form new daily rituals and practices of life that do not include the deceased. The initial

period after all the funeral and burial activities have been concluded, and most of the family and friends have left and gone back to their own lives, can leave a void in the bereaved's life that needs to be slowly filled in with new life activities. It is during this period that depression and despair can settle in over the bereaved. Family, friends, and care-givers can offer help and support to the bereaved but the work of passing through bereavement is an individual process and this should be respected by others, unless the bereaved's behavior and attitudes are destructive towards themselves or others. For the bereaved, the following suggestions might be helpful with their mourning process:

1. Allow time to grieve
2. Avoid making major decisions for a year
3. Share stories of the deceased with family and friends
4. Accept that grief is prolonged and has ebbs and flows of emotions and sensitivity to the loss
5. Keep time occupied
6. Do not let well-meaning people control your time
7. Meet with legal and financial counselors
8. Take up new activities
9. Avoid sedatives such as drugs or alcohol to reduce the pain of grieving
10. Maintain a support system with others
11. Read or listen to stories of near-death experiences

12. Maintain faith through prayer, meditation, and/or
worship

There is no specific time-frame for one to grieve. Initially grief can be intense with significant outward signs of grief or it can be a period of strong resolution with private moments of grief expressed through tears and or prevailing thoughts about the deceased. After the funeral or memorial services are completed, the bereaved should begin to return to a new normal life with intermittent periods of grief called upon by remembrances of the deceased. These moments can range from a sense of sadness to profound grieving. Time and the adaptation to the loss of the deceased are the most helpful healing factors to help the bereaved return to a new normal life. Because of the mixed emotions and thoughts the bereaved have after the loss of a loved one, it is not advisable to make any long-lasting decisions for up to a year after the death of the deceased.



This will avoid making emotional or irrational decisions during a time of grief.

The bereaved and others should not be afraid to share stories about the deceased and what she or he meant to them. The sharing of these stories, although initially may be a little sensitive to some, will consciously and unconsciously help bring closure to the loss of the loved one. Although absent from the body, the deceased is there in the memories of the bereaved and the sharing of their stories. Grief can be prolonged, but the sharing of stories of the deceased can lessen its pain. As the bereaved share their stories and memories, the memories of the deceased will begin to become the composition of the memories

of others. C. S. Lewis, in a commentary on the death of his wife, who he referred to as “H” shares how his memory of H was formed after her death.

I am thinking about her nearly always. Thinking of the H facts – real words, looks, laughs, and actions of hers. But it is my mind that selects and groups them. Already, less than a month after her death, I can feel the slow, insidious beginning of a process that will make the H I think into a more and more imaginary woman. Founded on fact, no doubt. I shall put in nothing fictitious (or I hope I shan’t). But won’t the compositions inevitably become more and more my own? The reality is no longer there to check me, to pull me up short, as the real H so often did, so unexpectedly, by being so thoroughly herself and not me.

Following the funeral and or memorial services, the bereaved should try to keep their time occupied by their daily activities, work, care of the home and family, and taking up new activities that they may not have done while the deceased was alive. The bereaved should also be cautious not to let their time or counsel be taken up by well-meaning people. They should feel comfortable to say “no” to good-willingly people who want to keep them busy. The bereaved need some time alone to begin sorting out their new life. The bereaved should avoid using family and friends as their financial and legal counselors. They should consult with a non-biased third-party to advise and assist in the legal and financial issues associated with the deceased. This will help to provide an understanding of the bereaved’s legal and financial obligations and benefits as a result of the death of the deceased and help to avoid disagreements between family members and friends.

To ease the pain of bereavement, the bereaved should avoid resorting to drugs or alcohol to ease the pain. Dependency on these can lead the bereaved into serious mental and physical

health issues and will distort their ability to make reasonable decisions about themselves and others. To help ease the pain of bereavement, the bereaved may want to turn to their personal support system of family, friends, and counselor to talk through their grief. Also, turning to their faith and its practices can help with the bereavement process.

Research has also shown that awareness of near-death experiences, not necessarily having the experience, can also help in reducing people's fears of death and pain of bereavement. Near-death experiences appear to be universal phenomena that have been reported for centuries. A near-death encounter is defined as an event in which the individual could very easily die or be killed, or may have already been considered clinically dead, but nonetheless survives, and continue his or her physical life. A study conducted to determine if the hearing of near-death experiences, without having had a near-death experiences revealed that these stories were helpful both for the dying and the bereaved. As a participant in the study, when asked if awareness of near-death experiences influenced her concerns about bereavement, shared,



Well, I think it definitely does have an effect. It does make it easier and if the person is someone who has been taught through the Bible this isn't all there is. This is like kindergarten and we're on to something better. Even though they have heard that and been taught that in Sunday School, or something like that, to hear an actual bona fide story that people have written that they did go through this [near] death experience, but they came back. That's very assuring.

Near-death experience stories can provide the bereaved with contemporary stories of people who have experienced the finality of physical death and have seen that the pains of this

life are left in this life, that the deceased is most often met at death by others, and that in most cases, there is a sense of unconditional peace and love that welcomes the deceased. This knowledge, that loved one is at peace, may be helpful in reducing the pain of bereavement for the bereaved.

Conclusion

Death, dying and bereavement is a universal experience. No one gets out of this life alive. By understanding death and bereavement we can make this human experience more palatable and fulfilling. Finding meaning in death and bereavement can help a person grow emotionally and spiritually and be prepared for the inevitability of her or his death and the deaths of others.

May this e-book help bring you peace in a time of need. Maranatha.

David



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