Growing From Grief
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What is grief?

Our emotional response to loss is grief, distinct from bereavement and mourning.

Grief is not an illness we recover from, we do not return to the way things were before (I did not know that others felt this way).

Grief and loss change our worldview-beliefs about fairness, causality, connections with others, guilt, self-care, anger, losing that which is valued (cleaning house)-it is composed of thoughts, ideas, assumptions, feelings, behaviors- they are what we or others make of them-we grieve in context (personal, cultural)

What is the “new normal” for us? We define that over time-not necessarily a smooth ride for all
Factors influencing how we grieve - persons grieve in unique ways

**The nature of the loss** - violence, illness, accident, suicide, AD

**Our personal and social resources** to cope with this loss - disenfranchised grief

**Our experience with other losses** - how we coped with them

**Our relationship to the person who has died**
- *central to us or peripheral* - e.g., child, parent, grandparent, friend, pet, co-worker, possessions, body parts, our self, a job, a marriage, a relationship - **high and low grief deaths**

Whether grief is **acute or anticipatory** - Creating a Personal history, developing expectations about the future

**Prolonged grief** - anniversary reactions, unfinished business, **Ambiguous loss** - (wars, natural disasters, Christmas, Birthdays, Anniversaries, POWs, abductions, dementia)
Coping with loss involves 2 tasks:

- coping with the loss of the person – **primary task**
- adjusting to a new lifestyle without that person - **secondary task**

Grief is restoration to wholeness - it is like the tide - it comes and goes – we have ups and downs, good days and bad days.

The first year is often the most difficult - redefining who we are, our relationship to the person who has died, our lifestyle & life goals.

We no longer think of grief as stage-like (rigid, shoulds).

It is not shock, active processing/working thru, adjustment/moving on.

Loss (past) vs. restoration (future) orientation as a way of understanding grief - **Both are necessary** - we have to go backward before we can go forward - unfinished business, bereavement overload (covid).

Grief requires **work, effort, and faith** in the fact that indeed things will get better - **acceptance** of whatever might happen (trapeze).
Normal vs. abnormal grief

10% of grieving persons experience difficulty requiring professional attention (loss of son) - George Bonanno’s work
For others - either no appreciable impact or grief progresses “normally” over time - **Time per se is not the important factor**

What persons **do** with this time is **key** - “time heals all wounds” is really not accurate (**what you do is less important than why you do it**) (e.g. visiting the grave)

**You will stop doing or start doing something when you no longer need to** - most of us know (e.g. you can think of him/her without crying)

Whether our feelings **interfere** with our personal and social adjustment, our work, or our health is important

**Profound change** in our personality, relationships with others
**Sadness** that is out of proportion to the loss – **depression**
**Self-destructive** thoughts and behaviors- for some, suicide is the most extreme response to loss (e.g. Jan. 6, 9/11)
Normal vs. abnormal grief (continued)

Use of drugs or alcohol to cope - more likely if there is a history prior to the loss - guilt, anger, unfinished business

Hasty or unwise decisions - selling the house, moving, quitting one’s job, giving treasured things away

“I want things to be over with/ I want everything to be as normal as possible and as quickly as possible” - gender differences (doing vs. talking)

Trying to keep things as they always were
leaving the room intact, fixing the meal
washing/ironing the clothes

Persistent refusal of help/isolation from others
very important “red flag”

Wanting to hang onto the past is normal, especially if one is alone – is this is temporary or permanent is key - look at the whole picture
Growing from our grief

Our faith in the unknown and in ourselves is strengthened

We become more sensitive to how precious our relationships really are

We are able to forgive ourselves for our imperfections

We finish our unfinished business with others

We establish rituals that meaningfully symbolize our loss and our faith

We set new goals for ourselves- we acquire new skills (e.g. toilet, voicemail)

Our connection to that person who has died is strengthened- we have faith and hope that we will indeed be with them again

We can turn pain into purpose
Growing from Our Grief (continued)

We take better care of ourselves mentally and physically.

We become more sensitive to what others are going through who have lost a loved one— that others are indeed needy and vulnerable and that they need our understanding, empathy, and compassion— it is important to help them in their journey—become an interested listener.

In reaching out to others, we can be less judgmental and more supportive of them (collective and personal grief @ covid).

Helping others is curative—it allows us to focus on others and minimizes isolation, rumination, and loneliness/isolation.

Grief restores us to wholeness—we do not return to the way things were before—the person who has died continues to live within us—giving of ourselves allows that person to live—our “whole” is different.

We define a “New Normal” for us and grow personally and spiritually thru grief— We are whole (a circle), we lose a part of ourselves, thru grief, we are redefined (a new circle).
What to Do

• **Take care of yourself** - spiritually, physically, socially, and emotionally
• **Find a support group** - share your feelings with others who have been through what you have – keep going!
• **Reach out to someone special** to spend time with and share your innermost thoughts and feelings
• **Keep a diary, write a letter** to your loved one who has died
• **Do not allow yourself to become isolated from friends and family**
• **Treat every day as a new day** - letting go does not equal less love
• **Create a personal ritual** that gives the day meaning and honors the person
• **Give of yourself to others**
• **Learn to let go** of anger, guilt, or depression
• **Have patience and hope** for the future
• **Remember that it is what is in your heart** for the person that you have lost that is most important - it will be there forever - treasure it
Do not stand at my grave and weep;
I am not there, I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry;
I am not there, I did not die.