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

What elicits grief - acute vs. anticipatory grief
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**
adjusting to a new lifestyle without that person- **secondary**

**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 what Kubler-Ross described (e.g. denial, bargaining, etc.)

**Loss vs. restoration** orientation as a way of understanding grief **(see handout)**

**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 temporary or permanent and its impact 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

**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 are 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(handout)

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)
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.