LOSS AND GRIEF ISSUES

FRED NELSON
PSYCHOSOCIAL PROGRAM SPECIALIST
PALLIATIVE CARE PROGRAM
WINNIPEG REGIONAL HEALTH AUTHORITY
(204) 8370753
fnelson@ggh.mb.ca
“WHAT LIES BEHIND US AND WHAT LIES BEFORE US ARE TINY MATTERS COMPARED TO WHAT LIES WITHIN US”

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES
Tasks of Mourning

- Acceptance of the reality of loss
- Experience the pain of grief
- Adjustment to the environment without the deceased
- Withdrawal of emotional energy and reinvesting in other relationships

Worden, (1982)
Experiential Model

- Getting the news
- Finding out
- Facing realities
- Becoming engulfed with suffering
- Emerging from the suffering
- Getting on with life
- Experiencing personal growth

Hogan, (1996)
Transitions in Dying and Bereavement

- Walking the edges: when a death occurs
- Entering the depths: adjusting to loss
- Reconnecting with the world: mending the heart

Cairns et al. (2003)
## Adjusting to loss

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Cognitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>intense and conflicting emotions;</td>
<td>Sense of going crazy;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger, sadness, guilt, hopelessness;</td>
<td>Memory problems;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalized anxiety;</td>
<td>Understanding and concentration poor;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnified fears for self, others</td>
<td>Vivid dreams and nightmares</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Adjusting to loss

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Physical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continued withdrawal and isolation;</td>
<td>Tight chest, sharp pangs, shortness of breath;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting company but unable to ask;</td>
<td>Digestive upsets;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rushing into new relationships;</td>
<td>Aimless activity, gnawing emptiness;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-consciousness</td>
<td>Changes in appetite or sleep patterns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adjusting to loss

Spiritual

Sensing the presence of the person who died; visitations;

Continued lack of meaning or purpose;

Attempts to contact the person who died
NEW FOCUS IN GRIEF THEORIES

- Challenge to assumptions in mainstream models of grief
- Shift from severing to maintaining bonds
- Expanding focus on cognition and meaning-making in addition to emotion
- Challenges concept of endpoint in grieving
- Moves from universal to local focus

Niemeyer, 2001
CHALLENGING MAINSTREAM ASSUMPTIONS

Traditional grief theories argue that grief is a universal process that people go through in similar ways.

These stage and task theories assume that grief involves the “working through” of grief and the relinquishment of attachment ties.

Newer grief theories call into question these assumptions, based on new research with grieving people. 

Niemeyer, 2001
SHIFT FROM SEVERING TO MAINTAINING BONDS

Traditional grief theories have assumed that “successful grieving” requires withdrawal of psychic energy from the loved one.

Newer grief theories recognize the frequently adaptive role of maintaining a continuing bond with the deceased.
NEW FOCUS ON COGNITION AND MEANING-MAKING

Traditional grief theories have assumed the centrality of emotion and “catharsis” in the grieving process.

Newer grief theories supplement the traditional focus on emotion with greater attention to the cognitive and meaning-making processes involved in mourning.
NO NECESSARY ENDPOINT IN GRIEVING

Traditional grief theories have posited a point of “closure” or endpoint in grieving.

Newer theories challenge the assumption that there is any discernible end point in grieving, positing instead that the bereaved are engaged in an ongoing renegotiation of meaning over time.
Mourning process for the bereaved occurs within a web of mutually interdependent and constantly interacting bonds and meanings:

- How the universe works
- Place and power of the self
- Bond with the deceased
- Meaning of the deceased life
- Meaning of the death
- Community/family membership
CULTURAL COMPETENCE

- NOT MASTERY OF FIXED SET OF FACTS
- EMBRACES LIFELONG LEARNING
- UNRELENTING ATTITUDE OF OPENNESS AND CURIOSITY IN RELATION TO WAYS PEOPLE ARE UNIQUE AND DIFFERENT FROM OURSELVES

BROWNING (2004)
CULTURAL HUMILITY

“..INVOLVES THE CURIOSITY AND MOTIVATION TO UNDERSTAND THE WEB OF MEANING IN WHICH CHILDREN AND FAMILIES LIVE, AND THE REFLECTIVE CAPACITY TO EXAMINE OUR OWN CULTURAL VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS.”
Experience of grief

- Intuitive
  - Feelings of intense inner pain;
  - Inner cues viewed as feelings rather than thoughts;
  - Inability to separate from feelings of others

- Instrumental
  - Intellectual response to loss and challenge to adapt;
  - Ability to differentiate thoughts and feelings;
  - Ability to maintain a sense of control

Martin & Doka, (1993)
Expression of grief

**Intuitive**
- Outward expression that mirrors inner experience;
- Need to share and discuss feelings;
- Low physical energy and depression

**Instrumental**
- Control of feelings and behavior with energy directed toward activity;
- Need to sit quietly, think, and plan activities;
- High physical arousal, anxiety
Adaptive strategies

**Intuitive**

Feelings control actions, connections with other people;
Time allowed for grief;
Slow adjustment;
Need to find ways to fulfill responsibilities and handle problems

**Instrumental**

Need to express feelings in a controlled way through activity;
Restore normal activities;
Rapid adjustment;
Planned activity used to memorialize the person who has died, and solve problems related to the loss
Risk Factors

- History of difficult relationship
- Challenging circumstances of the death
- Intensity of grief reactions, both in anticipatory grief and bereavement
- Poor quality of support network as perceived by bereaved person
- History of unresolved losses (e.g. grief, abuse, abandonment)
Risk Factors (cont’d)

- Concurrent stresses (e.g. job or relationship difficulties, other caregiving roles, financial distress)
- Multiple losses
- History of drug or alcohol use
- History of illness, mental health issues, developmental problems

Cairns, Johnson, & Wainwright, (1993)
COMPLICATED GRIEF

- Preoccupation with yearning for, and searching for the deceased
- Intrusive images, ideas, recurrent dreams/nightmares
- Active avoidance of thoughts, communication, or action associated with the loss
- Interference with daily functioning
- Persistent symptoms

Ogrodniczuk (2003)
Grief and Depression

- Range & variability of moods and feelings
- Capable of internal and external expression
- Guilt assoc. with loss
- Wants solitude but responds to warmth
- Sporadic pleasure, retain sense of humor

- Moods and feelings are low, more static
- Absence of externally directed anger, internally directed
- Loss confirms they are bad or worthless
- Fear being alone or are unresponsive to others
- No pleasure, sense of humor

Fleming, (1986)
DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

GRIEF THAT PERSONS EXPERIENCE WHEN THEY INCUR A LOSS THAT IS NOT OR CANNOT BE OPENLY ACKNOWLEDGED, PUBLICLY MOURNED, OR SOCIA LLY SUPPORTED
DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

- RELATIONSHIP NOT RECOGNIZED
- LOSS NOT RECOGNIZED
- GRIEVER NOT RECOGNIZED
DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF: IMPACT

- GRIEF INTENSIFIED
- AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIP/CONCURRENT CRISIS = COMPLICATED GRIEF
- LACKING NORMAL SUPPORT
CHILDREN’S GRIEF

- Children know and understand much more than we give them credit for.
- One of the biggest impediments to children’s healing after death is...adults.
- Grieving children don’t need to be fixed.
- Don’t need to be “taught” as much as “allowed”..make their own meaning.
- Children are resilient, but not in a vacuum.
- “learn your theories well but lay them aside when you touch the reality of the living soul”
CHILDREN’S GRIEF (CONT’D)

- Labels work well for cans and bottles, but aren’t so good for kids.
- Forms of expression vary, what matters most is feeling understood.
- It is better off reframing emotions as messages to embrace rather than enemies to escape from.
- “Give sorrow words” or “paint” or “music” or “play” or “silence.”
- Children need, want, and deserve honesty, truth, and choices.
- The best thing we “all” can do for kids is to listen.
Common Clichés

- Exhort people to be strong:
  “the person who died wouldn’t want you to cry”
- Want people to hurry up their grief:
  “Life goes on”
- Increase guilt about how people grieve:
  “You aren’t counting your blessings”
- Suggest religion should comfort:
  “God never gives you more than you can handle”
- Discount and minimize:
  “I know just how you feel”

Linn, (1986)
Working with volatile emotions

- Encourage people to honor their sadness
- Understand ambivalence, explore pain and strengths
- Identify sources of guilt; facilitate forgiveness
- Offer strategies for defusing anger
- Identify the fears

OTHER SIDE OF EMOTION

- **SORROW**: memories bring a sense of loving and being loved
- **GUILT**: one decides what one wants to hold onto and value, the remainder is forgiven and released
- **ANGER**: energy for action; from the same source as initiative; growth requires dynamic energy
FEAR & ANXIETY: responding to change and getting ready for challenge, instead of "I am afraid" .."I am ready"; fear is an indicator of being at one’s personal edge where growth can happen.

HOPELESSNESS: recognition of the natural cycles of life can bring an acceptance of oneself and one’s experience of loss and grief.
WHY IS EXCELLENT SELF CARE ESSENTIAL?

- WE OWE IT TO OURSELVES AND OUR FAMILIES
- OUR WORK IS DRAINING
- WE OWE IT TO OUR CLIENTS THEMSELVES

WOLFELT (1996)
CAREGIVER WORKTAPES

BE AVAILABLE AT ALL TIMES
IF YOU’RE RESTING, YOU’RE LAZY
NO PAIN, NO GAIN
IF YOU REALLY CARE, YOU’LL GO
BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY

WOLFELT (1996)
Self Care Strategies

- Respect what your mind, emotions, and body are telling you
- Expect to feel a multitude of emotions
- Reach out for support
- Embrace your spirituality
- Acknowledge how you are changed by this experience

Wolfelt, (2002)
“FEEL DEEPLY

ACT WISELY “
HELP US TO BE THE ALWAYS HOPEFUL GARDNERS OF THE SPIRIT WHO KNOW THAT WITHOUT DARKNESS NOTHING COMES TO BIRTH AS WITHOUT LIGHT NOTHING FLOWERS

MAY SARTON (1993)
Web sites

- Grief Net: [www.griefnet.org](http://www.griefnet.org)
- Growth House Search: [www.growthhouse.org/search.htm](http://www.growthhouse.org/search.htm)
- Grief recovery: [www.griefrecovery.com](http://www.griefrecovery.com)
- Children: [www.childrensgrief.net](http://www.childrensgrief.net)
- Hospice Net: [www.hospicenet.org/index.html](http://www.hospicenet.org/index.html)
- Parents of Murdered Children: [www.pomc.com](http://www.pomc.com)
- Survivors of suicide: [www.main.org/sos/](http://www.main.org/sos/)
Bibliography