

A Primer on Grief

1. THE NATURE OF GRIEF

1.1 Loss is with us at every point in life. (e.g. loss of a dream, loss of an independence, loss of job, loss of parent). Losses occur predictably through the developmental stages of the lifecycle and unpredictably through the emergence of family of origin issues and unpredictably through many "surprises" in life, work, culture, world events. Loss thrusts a person, family, or community into a transition. In transition one goes from somewhere, to somewhere and in the middle it feels like nowhere--there is no solid footing, the feeling of being in a void.

1.2 Loss is generally not seen as a cause for personal growth and the coming together of a community of people (though both can happen significantly through grieving) but simply as something undesirable.

1.3 When loss is mismanaged the growth benefits are minimized.

1.4 It is not helpful to think of grief medically as a disease to be treated, but developmentally as a phase of development and growth which is part of healthy and maturing individuals and communities.

1.5 With significant loss, one never heals completely -- therefore accepting some ongoing measure of grief is part of growth and maturity. Normal, healthy grieving can take anywhere from six months to eighteen months.

1.6 There is a tendency for women to grieve better than men. Men often replace relationships rather than adequately grieve the loss or significant change in a relationship.

1.7 Going through the phases of grief does not mean that one no longer feels any of the emotions of other phases, but that one is no longer immobilized by these emotions. When one is no longer immobilized by the emotions of grief he/she will discover new energy to reinvest in relationships and in the future. "Thinking of the future" is one of the signs that there is movement into the final phase of grieving.

1.8 Unhealthy grief takes several forms:

- Absence of grief through denial
- Delayed grief through busyness
- Exaggerated grief where one is angry all the time or depressed all the time i.e. cutting off other feelings. One way to tell there is "good grief" going on is that the person experiences highs and lows of different emotions
- Prolonged grief that lingers and lingers.

1.9 Note the phases of grief from the chart and particularly the emotional symptoms (inner circle) and the physical manifestations (outer circle). Emotional and physical intensity tends to decrease as one moves through the phases. "Helpers" tend to pay more attention to grievers in the first phase and not the middle or end phase where most of the redefinition is taking place.

2. THE TASKS OF GRIEVING

2.1 In grieving there is nothing to fix but there is something to do. The tasks of grief are

- 2.1.1 to face the reality of the loss
- 2.1.2 to experience and talk about painful feelings until healing takes place
- 2.1.3 to redefine yourself in light of the loss and in the context of faith
- 2.1.4 to draw together with others experiencing loss and understand their experience and redefinition
- 2.1.5 to re-engage one's energies in constructive tasks when grief has subsided

3. HEARING ANOTHER'S GRIEF

It is helpful to listen to understand a person expressing grief. Correcting, teaching, spiritualizing, self-disclosing are not particularly helpful. Empathy is. Listening is loving. Healing comes through a person being able to verbalize their complex emotional and physical and intellectual experience to someone who accepts their strong emotions and seeks to understand even more. The following questions and phrases would be helpful in listening (the questions are done in parallel to the five tasks of grief in 2.1.1-2.1.5)

3.1. Facing the reality of the loss:

- In this experience what have you lost?
- How has this loss created a disturbance for you, for your family, for the community?

3.2 talking about the painful experience and feelings

- What emotions have you experienced this past _____?
- What other feelings are there?
- How has it felt to feel this way?
- Is it like . . . ?
- How does this feeling make you feel physically?
- What intensifies your feeling? Lessens it?

3.3 redefining yourself in light of the loss and in the context of faith

- How are you coming to terms with this loss?
- How is this loss affecting you spiritually?
- How is your experience and understanding of God changing?
- How are you redefining yourself in light of this loss?
- What will you do if you can't recover that which has been lost?

3.4 drawing together with others to understand their experience and redefinition

- Where are you at in the grief cycle?
- How is this experience changing you?
- How is this change showing up in your choices?

3.5 re-engaging one's energy once the grief has subsided

- How has your focus shifted from grieving the past to thinking of and dreaming about the future?
- Where do you feel motivated about investing your energy?
- How are you different as you begin to reinvest?