The Impact of GRIEF

GRIEF defined: response to experiencing the LOSS of any meaningful connection.

SIX TYPES OF TRIGGER for “ACCEPTED” LOSSES:

1) **Material** – a treasured possession, a home, a business, a car, moving into assisted living..

2) **Relationship** – death, divorce, dissolving a business partnership, loss of a friendship, death of a pet, betrayal...

3) **Intrapsychic** – the loss of a dream: infertility, loss of a relationship, failed business, parenting a child with disabilities who will not reach hoped-for milestones, unfulfilled goals...

4) **Functional** – temporary or permanent loss of a capability: dementia, loss of eyesight, impaired use of a limb, injury or illness that impacts cognitive or physical ability, joint replacement...

5) **Role** – loss of one’s accustomed role: promotion or demotion at work, adult child caring for parent, parents become empty nesters, students graduate, a stay-at-home parent goes to work or vice-versa...

6) **Routines** – loss of the familiar: retirement, re-negotiating responsibilities in a marriage or partnership, becoming a parent, entering a rehab facility, adding frequent visits to a hospital or care home to daily schedule, increased travel at work....
LESSER “ACCEPTED” LOSSES:

1) **Disenfranchised** – all losses that are poorly supported or understood in our society:
   - death of an ex-spouse
   - death of a pet
   - miscarriage
   - death of a same-sex partner
   - infertility
   - death of an adult sibling
   - death of an elderly or infirm family member
   - material loss by fire
   - loss of an online friend
   - death of a person to whom a loved-one donated an organ

2) **Ambiguous** – incomplete or ongoing loss that is impossible to resolve:
   - a person who is physically absent but psychologically present (missing soldier, kidnapped child, disappeared family member…)
   - a person who is physically present but psychologically absent (family member is physically present but emotionally absent, a loved one with dementia, a loved one in a persistent vegetative state, a loved one with a severe disability…)

3) **Anticipatory** – grieving in anticipation of a loss:
   - high school seniors preparing to leave home and understanding the loss of a relationship possible only when people live together
   - moving homes
   - aging parents
The Impact ON US:

- **Shock, Numbness, Denial and Disbelief** – All who grieve experience these sensations. These feelings are your body’s way of protecting you psychologically from the full reality until you have time to absorb the loss and begin to confront it and accept it. Think of it as a mental anesthesia. Physiologically these experiences are often accompanied by a thudding heart, nausea, stomachaches, headaches and dizziness.

- **Disorganization, Confusion, Searching and Yearning** – These feelings are also typical. As the anesthesia wears off – people in grief experience the pain in a wide variety of ways. Feeling out of control is your brain’s way of mirroring your sense of loss of control due to the death or loss of a meaningful connection in a manner not of your own choosing. Physiologically these experiences are often accompanied by hallucinations, panic attacks, explosive emotions and the inability to comprehend what others are saying although you can hear their words.

- The impact of these cognitive and physical experiences have additional ramifications: poor sleep, loss of appetite, increased appetite, digestive difficulties, sensitivity to noise, nausea, headaches, feeling detached from the world, skin reactions, general anxiety, loneliness, inability to be spontaneous or have fun because that triggers a fear of losing control, increased sensation of stress, inability to care for others’ needs.

- **There are biological reasons for this as determined by neuroscience.** Stress and grief release cortisol (and often adrenaline) into your bloodstream. Cortisol interferes with the pre-frontal cortex which is the logical, deliberate and decision-making, problem-solving part of the brain. Your brain is in survival mode – which means your brain stem, capable solely of fight or flight, is in control.

Some of the above is visible to others – some is not. What we typically forget about are the many triggers that can cause “bursts of grief”:

* holidays, places, fragrances, birthdays, food, music, seasons, age, music, family or business rituals, and celebrations.
MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT GRIEF:

1) **Grief and Mourning are the Same Thing**: They are not. Grief includes all of our thoughts and feelings about the loss. Mourning is the way in which you express your grief outside of your own head. Grief without mourning leads to physical deterioration and/or self-destruction.

2) **Grief and Mourning Progress in Predictable Ways**: They don’t. There are stages of grief and many people move between them repeatedly.

3) **You Should Move Away From Grief Not Toward It**: Our country’s dominant culture is uncomfortable with mourning. We are often told to overcome our grief or to “get on with life”. Suppressing grief leads to feelings of isolation, anxiety, confusion and depression and often causes people to escape their grief through drugs. Grief un-mourned does not disappear but manifests itself in other destructive ways.

4) **Tears of Grief are a Sign of Weakness**: Actually, crying excretes cortisol and releases stress helping your body to chemically rebalance. People often feel better after allowing themselves to cry, hence the saying “have a good cry.”

5) **Being Upset and Openly Mourning Reflects a Weakness in Your Faith**: Mourning is a spiritual journey of the mind and heart. It is also an individual experience. Those in grief are not always comfortable attending a worship service due to the number of people, the noise, the feeling of being “on display” or the center of attention.

6) **When Someone You Love Dies, the Grief We Experience is for the Physical Loss of the Person**: Actually, we experience many different types of loss when a loved one dies:
   - Loss of self: self, identity, self-confidence, health, personality
   - Loss of security: emotional, physical, financial, lifestyle
   - Loss of meaning: goals, dreams, desire to live, faith, joy

7) **You Should Try Not to Think about the Person Who Died on Holidays, Anniversaries, Birthdays**: If you try not to think about the loved one – where does that pain go? It won’t disappear. The pain is an emotional reflection of the heart wound. We don’t try to hide our physical wounds. We care for them. We should do the same for heart wounds.
8) **After Someone You Love Dies, You Should Try to Get Over Your Grief as Quickly as Possible:**

This is a reflection of our culture’s discomfort with grief and mourning and does not reflect a healthy approach. We don’t “get over” grief. We learn to live with it. We learn how to incorporate this experience into our life and into who we are.

9) **Nobody Can Help You With Your Grief:** Not true. It is true that words are often inadequate, especially at first – but the company of a supportive and loving friend or family members is helpful. It helps to be with somebody else who cares without evaluating and it helps to be with somebody else who has had a similar experience.

10) **When Grief and Mourning are Reconciled, They Are Done:** Also, sadly, not true. The grief does not disappear. Moreover, the sense of having completed “mourning” does not mean that bursts of grief won’t still happen on occasion. There are moments, and triggers, that will always remind you of what you have lost.
The Impact on Our Communication with Those Experiencing Grief:

Consider the many ways in which a person’s entire being is changed by the experience of grief. Most of us are less able to concentrate, have little compassion for others’ troubles, have little energy, are not sleeping well (which we know impacts our cognitive function in a myriad of ways including slower processing time), and, in fact, we may not be able to comprehend the words that are actually being spoken. Making decisions is more difficult because the brain is consumed with the arduous task of absorbing a reality that we do not wish to acknowledge.

List a few additional barriers to effective communication when you are grieving or the person with whom you are trying to communicate is grieving:

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